

Trust is Earned

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Summary: Toothless is wounded in a storm long before the events of the movie and a young Hiccup stumbles upon him in the cove off Raven's Point. They quickly bond, learning to trust each other and becoming fast friends. AU

## 1. Prologue: First Meeting

Hiccup stumbled through the forest, a mere boy of seven years, unable to understand why none in his village liked him. He did his best to fit in, talked often of killing dragons and fighting battles, and attempted to wrestle with his peers, but no matter what he did it just wasn't good enough. Couldn't they see that he was trying? He would never give up, despite his unhappiness his upbeat attitude wouldn't allow that, but as he grew older his sarcasm grew with him. He scowled, thinking of Snotlout's last insult, and wondered what he could have said in return, in order to stand up for himself.

Too lost in thought, Hiccup didn't pay attention to where he was walking and stumbled through a crack between two rocks. He fell onto a ledge above a valley he had never seen before. There was a small lake in the valley and Hiccup's curious mind pushed him to explore, temporarily forgetting the disappointment he was to his society.

He hurried down the steep slope, his small form easily navigating the cracks between rocks, and soon reached the lake's edge. Cupping his hands he scooped up some of the cool water and took a long sip, the walk having tired out his young body. When he had drunk his fill he sat back and laughed with joy. 'This is a place all my own!' he thought as he looked around the enclosed valley, 'no one else has been here before.' His young mind didn't think of his ancestors, who may have discovered the valley before, for all he cared was that he had a safe haven from his peers.

But Hiccup wasn't quite right in thinking that he was alone in the valley. A young dragon, injured wing by his side, had fallen there

"buffeted and wounded by the storm that had occurred only a week ago. Hiccup's laugh startled him from his sleep and he jerked awake, opening his large yellow-green eyes and staring accusingly at the intruder. Hidden in the shadows as he was, Hiccup didn't notice the dragon at first, but the Night Fury was not short on curiosity either. He stood up slowly, slinking around the edge of the valley to investigate the young human that had intruded upon his temporary home. Weak with hunger, the young predator did not seem to realize how much noise he was making until the young human's head snapped up, their eyes meeting.

Instantly Hiccup's eyes widened in fear and he scrambled to get up, backing away until he was against the cliff wall. Unknowingly, the Night Fury had approached from the side of the cove that held the only entrance " Hiccup was trapped. The two stared at each other, Hiccup frozen with fear and the dragon struck by curiosity. He was young enough that he had seldom seen humans, and none this close, or this young.

They remained that way for some time, but when it became clear that the dragon was not going to attack Hiccup relaxed, his own curiosity overcoming his fear. For all his and his peers' boasting of how they would kill a dragon they were still too young to participate in the raids. He had seen a dragon before " occasionally they would have to evacuate the house they were in when it caught on fire " and he certainly knew all the types of dragons common on Berk " people talked about them often enough " but he didn't recognize the dragon in front of him.

"Night Fury?" he whispered questioningly, staring at the black dragon in front of him.

At the sound of the human's speech the dragon in question tilted his head, narrowing his eyes aggressively at the intruder. He lifted his lip, growling slightly, and Hiccup pressed himself back against the cliff wall, the fear returning. Eventually he had the idea to slide himself along the wall and so, slowly but surely, he managed to make his way back to the entrance. He hurried upward, racing back in the direction he had come. Before he knew it young Hiccup had returned to the village, fueled by adrenaline and fear. He gasped wildly, telling all he could find about the wild dragon he had seen in the woods. Within a few hours though, he had given up. No one had believed him about the dragon, and so he told no one of the cove he had found.

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><p>The next day he returned to the cove, inching in slowly. The majority of his brain insisted that the dragon would have left by now " for he had not noticed the injured appendage " but some part of him was hoping it had not. Some part of him longed for another glimpse of the legendary dragon. This time he paused on the ledge, searching for the Night Fury (for he had confirmed that it was indeed a member of the unseen species), but he didn't have to look far before spotting him. The large creature was by the lakeside, sticking his head in wildly, attempting to catch a fish but clearly failing. The Night Fury was nothing if not persistent though, and in the long while in which he attempted to find a meal Hiccup took the time to pull out his notebook, drawing a quick sketch of the dragon.</p>

It was then that he noticed the wound on the dragon's wing, and the

protective way he kept it close to his body. His mind thinking furiously, Hiccup left the cove again, a crazy idea coming forming in his head.

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><p>It was a week after his first sighting that Hiccup finally mustered the courage to carry out his crazy plan. He returned to the cove a third time, fish in his hands and medicine at his belt, wrapped up in an old shirt of his. This time the dragon was again dozing, but in plain sight, and Hiccup cautiously made his way down to the bottom of the cove. The Night Fury perked up as he approached, but he was weak with hunger and did little more than watch warily as the boy approached, sniffing as he spotted the cod in the boy's arms. He longed to eat but he still had no reason to trust the young human and growled when Hiccup got too close. Hiccup hesitated, but the low growl was the only sign of aggression from the beast and he inched slightly closer.</p>

This time the dragon narrowed his eyes, barring his teeth and growling louder. Hiccup stopped, doubt flooding his mind, and held out the fish, not daring to come any closer. The dragon sniffed again, stretching his neck toward the fish, but he made no move to approach the Viking. Thinking quickly, Hiccup tossed the cod in front of the Night Fury, hoping to move in while the reptile was distracted.

The Night Fury sniffed the fish once but was too hungry to examine it further. He gulped it up in one swallow, giving Hiccup no time to approach. Hiccup narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, realizing that one fish was nowhere near enough for a starving dragon, but he was unwilling to leave so soon. He inched closer, sitting as close as he dared to the dragon that he imagined could probably swallow him whole. Hiccup was not a large Viking by any means but what he lacked in physical stature he made up for with his emotional stature. Though he didn't quite realize it, he was one of the bravest Vikings around, for not many would approach a Night Fury unarmed, and fewer still would have at the tender age of seven. But Hiccup wasn't aware of any of this, not concerned with his bravery as he contemplated how to help the dragon.

They remained that way for some time, once again staring at each other, neither budging from their spot. Eventually though the sun began to fall in the sky and Hiccup stood, walking to the edge of the cove. He knelt, grabbing several sticks and crafting a miniature lean-to for the medicine he had at his belt. He did not want to take it back to the village nor did he want it spoiled by bad weather. When he was satisfied that his lean-to would hold he stood, sent one last glance back at the dragon, and left the cove.

Young and innocent as he was, Hiccup did not realize how much it meant that he had turned his back on the Night Fury. To any forest animal, to turn your back indicated a deep level of trust, showing that you trusted the other not to attack you while your back was turned. It meant a lack of fear, and while it could have been a foolish gesture to a more dangerous predator the Night Fury was more intelligent than your average beast. He was in no shape to attack, but also intrigued by the young human's trust.

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><p>The next day Hiccup returned again, a small basket of fish upon his back and one in his hands. This time as he approached the dragon stood, approaching him. Hiccup stopped his movements, startled by the turn of events, but nevertheless held out the fish for the hungry dragon. The Night Fury opened his mouth â€“ startling Hiccup for a moment with the lack of teeth â€“ and snapped his teeth into place, quickly gulping down the fish again. Hiccup sat, placing the basket next to him, and the dragon copied his movements, resting back on his haunches. Hiccup watched curiously as the dragon he had recently dubbed 'Toothless' began to cough, hacking up part of the fish he had so recently eaten and dropping it into Hiccup's hands. He held it reluctantly, unsure of how to react while the dragon stared at him expectantly.</p>

Following the dragon's gaze from the fish in his hands to his mouth and back again Hiccup quickly realized what the Night Fury expected of him. He frowned but followed suit, as yet unaware of just how unappealing raw fish was. His first bite quickly rectified that lack of knowledge though and it took prompting from the dragon to force him to swallow. He offered a weak smile, not wanting to disappoint his new found friend â€“ not to mention a dangerous dragon â€“ and was surprised when the dragon attempted to replicate his actions.

His smile morphed into a more genuine expression as he realized how intelligent the dragon truly was, before this he had only seen them as mindless killers, and any fear that had remained quickly fell away. He shifted onto his knees, rising slightly, and slid the basket in front of him. "Here Toothless," he spoke quietly, opening the basket and tipping it onto the ground in front of the Night Fury. The dragon's ears perked up at the new name but his eyes remained fixated on the basket as the fish spilled out.

The dragon sufficiently distracted Hiccup stood, finally getting the chance to examine the wounded wing. It was quite badly damaged, and would take a while to heal, but even Hiccup's inexperienced mind was able to determine that it would leave no permanent damage.

Unfortunately, Hiccup was still small, and the basket of fish he had carried even more so, and it wasn't long before Toothless realized that the young human was examining his wing. He growled lightly, not so much to scare Hiccup but to warn him to stay away, and fled, standing a safe distance away from the Viking.

Hiccup felt disappointment at having been unable to help his new-found friend but it did not dampen his resolve.

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><p>Day after day Hiccup returned to the cove, bringing food whenever he could. Often he and the Night Fury did not interact, each sitting in their own corner of the cove left to their own thoughts. Despite the lack of interaction they grew comfortable with each other and Toothless no longer growled when the boy approached. Eventually, two and a half weeks after Hiccup's initial meeting with the dragon, he was allowed to touch the Night Fury's wing.</p>

Though Toothless growled when he touched it, Hiccup could tell it was

a growl of pain and frustration, one not directed at Hiccup but rather at his wound. Having grown up a Viking, in a village that experienced frequent dragon raids, Hiccup had seen many people clean and dress wounds (though admittedly there wasn't much cleaning going on in Berk) and was able to adequately coax Toothless into the lake, hoping to clean his wound. With much fidgeting on the part of the dragon, the wound was eventually cleaned and dressed with the herbs Hiccup had brought so long ago. He had also attempted to bandage the wound, but the wing was large and he had been unable to. Instead he had settled for scolding Toothless, instructing him to keep his wing out of the dirt.

\* \* \*

><p>A month passed in this manner and, though he didn't show it among his peers, Hiccup began to grow more confident in himself. Often he and Toothless would play, racing around the small cove or swimming in the lake, and as the dragon's wound healed they spent quite a bit of time together, beginning to understand each other's quirks and oddities, their likes and dislikes. Hiccup learned that Toothless hated eel and loved to be scratched. Toothless learned that Hiccup quickly grew depressed when talking about his home â€“ often nudging him whenever he went off on a tangent â€“ and that Hiccup was very clever.</p>

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><p>By the time Toothless' wound had healed a lean-to had been constructed in the cove â€“ a nicely built fort that Hiccup had constructed and designed himself. The dragon and Viking were now the best of friends and could almost understand each other's words. Yet despite this closeness, Hiccup was worried that Toothless would leave him now that he could fly again. Insecure as always, he couldn't help but feel that Toothless had only liked him for the food and medicine he had provided. Hiccup's fears were unfounded though, as Toothless was about to prove to him.</p>

Hiccup gave his friend the all clear, looking over his friend's wing one last time. "You're all clear buddy," he said easily, trying not to convey his trepidation as he stepped away.

Toothless' eyes lit up as he shook himself with happiness, unfurling his wings fully for the first time in almost three months. He hunkered down, about to take off, but paused, glancing back at the Viking who had returned his flight to him earlier than he expected, and who had become his friend in the months they spent together. Hiccup watched, puzzled, as Toothless looked from him to his own back and then back again. '\_Come with me,'\_ he seemed to be saying.

Hiccup's own eyes lit up with wonder as he fully realized what Toothless was offering. He had thought of riding the dragon before, soaring through the skies with a view that no Viking had ever had before, but this was Toothless' first flight on his 'new' wings. It was a special thing, as the Night Fury would prove that he belonged in the sky, and Toothless wanted to share it with Hiccup. He hesitated but Toothless didn't budge, staring at him expectantly, and he grinned, running over to Toothless and climbing up onto his back. His small legs quickly struggled to hold on and he leaned over, hugging the dragon's neck.

Toothless took off quickly with a powerful stroke of his wings, speeding high into the sky, but he slowed down soon enough, mindful of the rider on his back. Together they glided through the sunset, reveling in the glory of the flight, and Hiccup's hold began to lessen as his curiosity overtook his fear. He could feel his friend's powerful muscles straining underneath him, longing to be free, and before long he nudged them toward a cliff face, asking Toothless to land. As much as he loved the feeling of flying with his dragon he knew he was holding Toothless back.

Toothless acquiesced, landing gently on the cliff, and Hiccup slid off as easily as his small body could manage. Without words Toothless understood what Hiccup was doing and sent his rider a look of gratitude. '\_Thanks'\_ he appeared to say, taking off faster than before as he strained his unused muscles. He shot forward, quickly disappearing from Hiccup's sight, but all fear Hiccup had of Toothless leaving had vanished when he first sat on the dragon's back.

He sat down, content to wait, and pulled out his notebook â€“ already planning several saddle designs. Gobber had recently apprenticed him in the forge â€“ one of the few Vikings who acknowledged his existence â€“ and he was already thinking of which metal he would use and how to forge it. He was so excited he didn't dwell on the fact that it would be a long while before he was able to forge anything, small and inexperienced as he was. For now he would make do with what he had. Leather he could get easily enough.

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><p>By the time Toothless returned Hiccup had already planned several saddle designs. He showed them eagerly to Toothless but the Night Fury only yawned, worn out from his long flight. His yawn only served to remind Hiccup how late it was and he climbed aboard his dragon once more, hugging tightly as Toothless led them back to the cove. Once there Toothless used his lightning to light a small fire in the much used pit and Hiccup leaned against Toothless, modifying his designs by the light of the fire. As Toothless fell asleep beneath him Hiccup too drifted off and boy and dragon slept together under the starry skies.</p>

\* \* \*

><p>The years passed and Hiccup and Toothless began to understand each other more and more, communicating in a language that no other Viking had spoken before. The lean-to in the cove grew with them, filled with things Hiccup brought from Berk but did not return, old saddles that he had outgrown, and other odds and ends. It became a regular hut and every now and again Hiccup spent the night in the cove, falling asleep before he could return to Berk â€“ though more often than not he slept beside Toothless and not in the shelter of his hut. If Hiccup was bothered by how little he was missed he stopped showing it. Though he still spoke to Toothless about his troubles in the village he began to care less and less with the goings-on of Berk. He even began to refer to it as 'Berk' or 'the village' in his head, not 'home' or 'my village'. He was careful enough not to stay out too often, even the village misfit can be missed, but nobody was ever sorry to see him go. His mishaps in the forge and his clumsiness on the ground did not endear him to the

village folk any more than his unnatural smallness and his lack of a desire to kill dragons.<p>

And so Hiccup and Toothless grew together, living in the cove off Raven's Point, and becoming far more together than anyone ever thought they would be alone. They faced few challenges, alone as they were, but of course such peace never lasts - and every Viking has to go through Dragon Training.

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><p><strong>AN: Well, I hoped you liked it. This wasn't really something I had planned out - I really should be writing other things - more of a spur of the moment idea that I really wanted to write out. I have an idea of how this would alter the movie but I may or may not write it. Let me know if you think I should continue and whether or not you liked it! Thanks for reading!<strong>

## 2. Training Begins

\*\*AN: So, I decided to continue this after all. Just a few quick notes:\*\*

"This is regular speech."

'These are thoughts.'

'\_And this is Dragonese.\_'

\*\*Let me know what you think!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup crept into his house slowly, trying to avoid a confrontation with his father. Usually he snuck around the inhabitants of Berk easily, his lithe form leading to silent footfalls and his time spent with Toothless having taught him to walk unseen, but after the mishap of last night's raid his father was waiting for him.<p>

"Hiccup, we need to talk," Stoick said, rising from his spot near the fire.

Hiccup winced, turning to face his father. 'I should have stayed with Toothless tonight,' he thought ruefully, knowing that it never would have happened. If his father had noticed his disappearanceâ€¦ well it wouldn't have been fun.

"It's time you learn to fight dragons. You get your wish. Dragon training...you start in the morning. You'll need this." Hiccup froze, unable to speak as Stoick handed him the axe, almost too heavy for him to hold.

"I don't want to fight dragons," he insisted, fear racing through him at the very thought of harming Toothless.

Stoick merely laughed. "Come on. Yes you do," he spoke dismissively, turning back to the fire.

"Rephrase. Dad I can't kill dragons."

"But you will kill dragons." Stoick turned back to him expectantly, still not believing his son's words.

"No, I'm really very extra-sure that I won't."

"It's time Hiccup."

"Can you not hear me?"

"This is serious son!" He grabbed the axe again, picking it up and forcing Hiccup to hold it properly. "When you carry this axe, you carry all of us with you. Which means you walk like us, you talk like us, you think like us. No more ofâ€¢ this."

"You just gestured to all of me."

"Deal?"

"This conversation is feeling very one-sided."

"Deal?" Stoick asked a second time, anger beginning to creep into his voice.

Hiccup sighed, glancing down at the axe in his hands. He didn't know how he was going to get out of this one. "Deal," he finally conceded, glancing back up at his father.

"Good. Train hard. I'll be back. Probably."

"And I'll be here. Maybe." Hiccup watched his father leave, resigned, and set down the axe as soon as the door shut. Not wanting to think about what he had just agreed to, he headed upstairs and tried to get some sleep.

'Great, just great,' Hiccup thought as he lay awake in his bed, unable to sleep. He was going to have to learn how to kill dragons all the while hiding the fact that he didn't want to kill dragons. Not to mention he knew quite a few tricks to handle angry or scared dragons that he would be unable to use. If he showed off those tricks people would surely get suspicious. He would do anything to protect Toothless â€" even fail dragon training in front of the entire village. Maybe he could just grab an eel or two, and hope that their scent would keep the dragons away from him. That way they wouldn't hurt him and he wouldn't give anything away. With these troubled thoughts the Viking rolled over and tried to get some sleep.

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup tagged along behind his peers as they entered the arena, ignoring their comments about him. He was not looking forward to this at all.</p>

"Let's get started!" Gobber announced, pulling him from his thoughts. "The recruit who does best will win the honor of killing his first dragon in front of the entire village."

As Hiccup lagged behind Gobber threw a supportive arm around him and ushered him forward, pushing him in line with the other Vikings.

"Don't worry. You're small and you're weak. That'll make you less of a target. They'll see you as sick or insane and go after the more Viking-like teens instead," he said cheerily, obviously attempting to cheer Hiccup up.

Hiccup gave a weak smile, but Gobber had completely misinterpreted his fear. He wasn't worried about the dragons at all, though he could hear them screaming in their cages. He winced; he had always avoided the arena for this reason. None of them were saying anything intelligible, nothing he could understand, but he could still hear the pain in their voices as they screamed in rage and fear.

"Behind these doors are just a few of the many species you will learn to fight," Gobber announced grandly as Fishlegs bounced and giggled with excitement, barely able to contain himself at the thought of seeing so many different dragons. Hiccup just grimaced again and was glad there weren't more. As Gobber went over each kind, and Fishlegs muttered comments in his ear, Hiccup thought back to what he knew of each individual species, and the encounters he had had with them in the wild. Gobber pulled a lever, breaking him from his thoughts as the cross beam on the last of the doors was raised.

"Whoa, wait! Aren't you gonna teach us first!?" Snotlout was the first to speak, alarmed at Gobber's actions.

"I believe in learning on the job." Gobber pulled the lever all the way and the Gronckle thundered out of its cave, charging into the ring. The Vikings scrambled to get away, avoiding the deadly predator.

"Today is about survival," Gobber told them. "If you get blasted, you're dead. Quick, what's the first thing you're going to need?"

"A doctor?" Hiccup muttered, thinking of how Gobber and the teens would react if he spoke to the dragon in its native tongue.

"Plus five speed?" Fishlegs inputted as the teens continued to run.

"A shield," Astrid spoke strongly, knowing exactly what she was talking about.

Gobber nodded. "Shields. Go," he instructed them, watching as they all scrambled to pick one up. Hiccup grabbed his and ran, ever light on his feet as he continued to evade the Gronckle. "Your most important piece of equipment is your shield. If you must make a choice between a sword or a shield, take the shield."

As Ruffnut and Tuffnut fought for their shield the Gronckle approached them, intent on taking them out. Hiccup hesitated, wondering if he should help, but he hesitated for too long and the dragon took aim, blasting the shield out of their hands and sending them to the ground.

"Tuffnut, Ruffnut, you're out!" Confused, they stumbled out of the way as the Gronckle swallowed a pile of rocks nearby. "Those shields are good for another thing. Noise. Make lots of it to throw off a dragon's aim."

Hiccup snorted as everyone began to hit their shields, that may work

with a Gronckle but not every species of dragon was so easily distracted. The training continued and soon Snotlout and Fishlegs had been eliminated. Astrid rolled near Hiccup, who offered her a weak smile. "So, I guess it's just you and me huh?" he said, hoping to start a conversation.

"No. Just you," Astrid returned dismissively, rolling away as the Gronckle approached again.

Hiccup ducked behind his shield, allowing it to take the full blast, and then rolled away, getting to his feet lightly as he raced away from the Gronckle.

"One shot left!" Gobber reminded them as the Gronckle turned toward Astrid â€“ the closer target. It dove straight toward her but Astrid clumsily dodged the shot, summersaulting away again. Gobber finally approached, wrestling the angry dragon back into its cave, and Hiccup watched regretfully, wishing he could have helped the dragon.

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><p>Hiccup left for the cove as soon as he could, easily slipping away from the other Viking teens. He had seen Astrid give him a suspicious glance earlier when he had evaded the Gronckle, but his out of place actions had quickly been forgotten. Hiccup may still have been clumsy in his day to day life but growing up with dragons as his only friends had taught Hiccup how to dodge, and as clumsy as he was on the ground he and Toothless moved as one when together. He wasn't nearly as clumsy as he used to be and, approaching the cove, he easily navigated the rocks, jumping from the ledge to land lightly on his feet in the cove.</p>

Toothless was nowhere in sight and Hiccup gave a loud whistle, heading to the lean-to to fetch the saddle. Toothless had evidently been in the area for as Hiccup returned the dragon was landing, greeting Hiccup happily.

'\_Hey bud\_,' Hiccup returned in Dragonese, his tone conveying he was in no mood to talk. He gave Toothless a quick scratch on the neck as he strapped the saddle on and Toothless sent him a concerned look.

'\_What happened?\_' he asked, unaware that Hiccup had begun dragon training.

'\_Later,\_' Hiccup said shortly, jumping into the saddle. '\_Right now, let's justâ€\_|\_ he trailed off but Toothless understood, unfurling his mighty wings and taking off with one quick down stroke. He poured on the speed and Hiccup leaned over, the two becoming one as they navigated the evening sky.

Dragon and rider headed for the stacks of rock sticking out of the sea, looking for a challenge, and it wasn't long before they reached them. Hiccup grinned in anticipation as Toothless hit him with his ear flap playfully and then together they dove in, full of anticipation. They flew around the stacks at top speed, looping and twisting and turning, straining every muscle as they narrowly avoided being hit. Together they looped around and around, never leaving the stacks as they remained close to the sea, taking every possible route between the tall towers of rock.

Eventually they rose above them, panting and exhausted, and Toothless shot a victory bolt for their successful flight. Hiccup grinned, recognizing Toothless' trick, and removed his feet from the stirrups, crouching on the saddle as they approached the fireball. Toothless shifted beneath him at the exact moment Hiccup jumped and he flew above the fireball laughing, his earlier troubles forgotten as he landed on Toothless' back. He remained standing on the saddle, Toothless slowly rising, and together they headed for one of the larger rock stacks, landing on top of it lightly.

Hiccup easily jumped down from his position atop the saddle, sitting immediately and leaning against Toothless, who had also settled himself upon the ground. '\_Thanks,\_' he said gratefully, watching the approaching storm clouds.

Toothless merely purred slightly in reply, having enjoyed the tough flight just as much as Hiccup had. He was well able to recognize that something was troubling his rider's mind and was more than willing to wait for Hiccup to get it off his chest.

'\_I started dragon training today,\_' Hiccup finally said, turning reluctantly to face his dragon.

Toothless started slightly, eyes widening in shock. That hadn't been what he had expected at all. He took a moment to gather his thoughts before speaking. '\_Why?\_' he finally asked simply, aware that Hiccup did not need another person criticizing his every move.

Hiccup too took a moment before speaking. '\_My father,\_' he replied, pausing as Toothless growled slightly. They had had many debates on the capabilities of Hiccup's father but they both knew it wasn't the time to get into that. '\_I know he just wants to protect me butâ€¢\_|\_ he put his face in his hands for a moment before turning to look at Toothless. '\_They're trapped in there, screaming and scared but I couldn't help them. I knowâ€¢| I know it's not my fault butâ€¢\_|\_ his gaze turned distant, his mind going back to the arena. '\_I wish I could help them.\_'

Toothless didn't have to ask who 'they' were. '\_It's not your fault,\_' he reinforced, nudging Hiccup gently. '\_One day we'll get them free â€" they won't be there forever.\_'

Hiccup perked up slight, nodding in determination. '\_I know. It's just â€" nobody deserves to be treated like that.\_'

The Night Fury growled in agreement with Hiccup's words, jostling his wings slightly and forcing Hiccup to stand as he too got up. '\_Nobody deserves to be treated as you are either,\_' he said, a fact that he felt Hiccup forgot far too often. Hiccup just shook his head, chuckling slightly at the comment he heard far too often in his opinion. He heaved himself onto the dragon's back just as the rain began to fall, the cold water chilling him quickly.

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><p>After heading to the cove and removing the saddle from Toothless, Hiccup returned to Berk in a better mood then he had left it, heading to the great hall for his evening meal. The large doors rattled as he entered and he arrived just in time to hear Gobber begin, speaking to

the teens sitting together at one of the many tables, their own meals already finished.<p>

"Alright. Where did Astrid go wrong in the ring today?" he asked, gazing at them expectantly.

"I mistimed my summersault dive. It was sloppy. It threw off my reverse tumble," Astrid replied quickly, ever the perfectionist.

"Yeah. We noticed," Ruffnut informed her sarcastically, scoffing.

"No, no, you were great. That was so 'Astrid'," Snotlout interrupted admiringly, staring at Astrid.

"She's right, you have to be tough on yourselves," Gobber told him as Hiccup approached the table. "Where did Hiccup go wrong?" He asked as Hiccup grabbed his food.

Ignoring the teens' derogatory comments Hiccup didn't bother to find a place at their table, instead heading to the nearest table and sitting alone. Bolstered by the evening's flight, and also slightly worn out, he tuned everybody out, digging into his meal. He refocused in on the group as Gobber set a book in the center of the table.

"The dragon manual. Everything we know about every dragon we know of," he announced amid a rumble of thunder that shook the hall. "No attacks tonight. Study up."

The teens fussed, Fishlegs instantly perking up while Tuffnut, Ruffnut, and Snotlout immediately protested. They left shortly, following Gobber out the door, and Hiccup stood up, approaching Astrid, the last to go.

"So I guess we'll shareâ€œ" he began. He had no expectations that Astrid would actually want to spend time with him but he had to admit he was interested in what the book had on Night Furies and decided to be polite.

"Read it," Astrid told him shortly, pushing the book toward him and leaving.

'So much for being polite.' He grabbed the book, carrying it back to his table and setting it aside as he finished his meal. By the time he was done eating all the other Vikings remaining had left and he grabbed the few remaining candles, opening the book just as another rumble of thunder sounded from outside. He poured through page after page of different dragons, laughing when the information varied quite a bit from what he had learned in person. The facts were mainly correct but all the warnings merely served to remind him of how little Vikings knew about dragons.

When he finally reached the Night Fury page it was blank, save for a few details. "Speed unknown. Size unknown. The unholy offspring of lightning and death itself," he read aloud. "Never engage this dragon. Your only chance, hide and pray it does not find you." At this he openly snorted. Toothless was dangerous, of that he had no doubt, but he couldn't help but think of all the times that his

dragon had acted like nothing more than an overgrown kitten.

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><p>The next morning the arena had been arranged like a maze, small fragile walls running through the entire area. Hiccup grinned, it would be easy to hide in there, and he had a mind for puzzles â€“ it wouldn't take him long to memorize the layout. His grin faltered slightly as he heard the angry roar of a Deadly Nadder and he turned into the maze, running off without bothering to grab a shield.</p>

He heard Gobber criticize him from his spot above the ring but ignored it, focusing his senses on determining the position of the Nadder. He had played hide and seek at night with a Night Fury â€“ avoiding the Nadder, and his peers, would be a piece of cake. He took a sharp turn, ducking against a wall as the Nadder hopped on top of the maze, searching out its prey.

"Today is all about attack," Gobber told them. "Nadders are quick and light on their feet. Your job is to be quicker and lighter."

Hiccup smirked at that. No problem. He tilted his head, listening for the Nadder, but all he heard was the sound of the other teens finally entering the maze. He slid down the wall he was taking cover behind and closed his eyes, listening carefully. He heard the Nadder ready its tail spikes, Fishlegs' scream as they headed straight for him, and then the sound of the spikes against the Viking's shield.

"I'm really beginning to question your teaching methods," the larger boy squeaked loudly with fear.

Gobber ignored him. "Look for its blind spot. Every dragon has one. Find it, hide in it, and strike."

'Smart,' Hiccup thought, 'but it won't be long before the Nadder turns its head.' As the sounds of the Nadder neared him he stood noiselessly, slinking through the shadows as he moved along. Ignoring the sounds of the twins arguing he avoided his peers and pressed himself against another wall.

"Blind spot? Yes. Deaf spot? Not so much." He heard Gobber announce as the Nadder attacked the twins.

Glancing around the corner he watched as Astrid confronted the Nadder, only to be stopped by Snotlout's foolish attempts to impress her. Hiccup laughed to himself as the irate dragon took off after the two teens, glancing up at Gobber watching them closely. Suddenly he heard the sound of the maze walls collapsing behind him, spinning around to see Astrid come flying through the dust. She crash-landed on top of him, laying him out in a limb-tangled mess, and he struggled to get free.

"Oooh! Love on the battlefield!" Tuffnut joked crudely.

"She could do better," Ruffnut responded dismissively.

As the Nadder approached Hiccup managed to untangle himself from Astrid, sliding out from underneath her. He growled a quick '\_Back off!\_' at the approaching dragon, quiet enough not to be noticed by the other teens but loud enough to stop the dragon in its tracks.

Astrid took the opportunity to stand, swinging her axe and hitting the Nadder with the flat side of it.

Hiccup winced as the Nadder yelped and scurried off, Gobber hobbling to wrestle it back into its cave. He relaxed his tense position, noticing for the first time that all eyes were on him.

"Is this some kind of a joke to you?" Astrid asked angrily. "Our parents' war is about to become ours. Figure out which side you're on." She stormed off and Hiccup watched, stunned, knowing perfectly well that she was quite unaware of just how accurate her words were.

'I'm not on either side,' he thought furiously as the rest of the teens left the arena. 'I just want to stop the fighting!' He sent a regretful glance back at the Nadder's cage before he too left.

\* \* \*

><p>Toothless was waiting for him as he arrived in the cove and Hiccup sent him a grateful smile. The dragon training was draining beyond belief, doing nothing more than reinforcing his thoughts that he was helpless, but the time spent with Toothless was more than enough to make up for that.</p>

Seeing that Hiccup was still depressed Toothless pounced, knocking Hiccup to the ground as he licked his face. That elicited a laugh and Toothless backed off, pleased with himself. Hiccup sat up, grin wide on his face.

'What was that for bud?' he asked as he stood, wiping his face with his sleeve.

Toothless just smirked, taking off slightly and grabbing Hiccup's small arms with his claws, dropping him in the lake. The teen surfaced quickly, sputtering, and Toothless dove down, entering the lake near him with a loud splash. Hiccup laughed, swimming over and jumping on Toothless' back, attempting to force his head underwater. The Night Fury snorted, jerking his head upward, and Hiccup lost his grip, falling back into the water with a splash. Toothless quickly turned, hoping to push Hiccup under, but Hiccup used his size to his advantage, diving under the dragon and climbing aboard him from the other side. Unable to shake him off, Toothless rolled, belly up, forcing Hiccup to release him and surface.

The two friends continued in this manner for a short while longer, leaping and pouncing on each other as they rough-housed in the water, before finally stopping, out of breath. Hiccup tread water lightly, smiling as he caught his breath, and Toothless dove beneath him, resurfacing with the Viking on his back. Despite the lack of a saddle, Hiccup instinctively settled himself into position, legs hugging the dragon's neck, and Toothless leapt out of the water, flapping wildly to get them into the air.

Finally managing it they shot up into the air, water streaming off them as they left the lake. They didn't bother to stop and fetch the saddle — Hiccup had been riding Toothless for years and as long as they didn't execute any complex maneuvers he was more than capable of holding on — instead flying lazily through the sky. Hiccup nudged Toothless toward a common relaxation spot for them, a cliff where the

rocks were formed in square columns and where Terrible Terrors often rested.

There was little vegetation and prey on the barren island but the little that was there was the perfect size for the miniature dragons. Hiccup and Toothless were friends (and if not friends then at the very least acquaintances) with many of the small families that resided there.

The two friends spent the rest of the afternoon on Terror Island (as Hiccup had named it) and enjoyed their time playing with the young Terrors. Toothless had a hard time keeping them from climbing all over him but Hiccup didn't mind in the slightest. The Terrors were the same speed as him on the ground and he raced across the rocks with them as their parents sat and watched.

As the sun began to set Toothless curled up beside the fire he had lit and Hiccup sat down beside him, leaning against his friend. The Terrors followed suit, resting themselves anywhere they could find: one on each side of Hiccup, another on his lap, and several more finding spots on Toothless. The dragon in question snorted slightly but was far too used to the small dragons' antics to react.

Hiccup smiled at the coziness of the scene before he began to speak, capturing the attention of the Terrors as he told them a scary story that he made up as he went along. He added both Vikings and Dragons in the story and, though his eyes were closed, even Toothless was listening closely, for Hiccup was a very good story teller.

The tale ended, Hiccup finishing with a menacing '\_and she was never seen again!\_', and one of the young Terrors squeaked loudly.

'\_That didn't really happen, did it?\_' she asked, staring up at Hiccup with wide eyes.

'\_Of course it didn't,\_' one of her older brothers boasted, '\_everyone knows trolls aren't real.\_'

Hiccup smiled, rubbing the young Terror's head. '\_It's just a story\_,,' he reassured her, nudging another of the Terrors off his lap and standing. Toothless followed suit, yawning and shaking the Terrors off his back as he too stood.

'\_Can't you tell another story?\_' one of the other Terrors asked as Hiccup hopped onto Toothless.

Hiccup chuckled slightly at the dragons' enthusiasm. '\_Sorry, it's time I headed back. My own family is missing me.\_' Toothless snorted beneath him and as they took off he growled at Hiccup.

When they were out of range of the other dragons the Night Fury spoke up. '\_You know perfectly well no one is waiting for you back at your village,\_' he said angrily. While Toothless always supported Hiccup and tried to bolster his confidence he hated it when Hiccup denied the obvious. Hiccup refused to admit that his situation was less than ideal and it annoyed Toothless to no end. Hiccup needed to admit that how his village acted was wrong but the Night Fury had never been able to make him do so.

\* \* \*

><p>Because Hiccup didn't have to remove the saddle Toothless flew them as close to Berk as he dared, dropping off Hiccup on the outskirts of town. Despite this the darkness had already fallen by the time Hiccup had returned and he knew he was late for dinner with the other dragon training recruits. He said goodbye to Toothless quickly, hurrying toward the abandoned catapult tower. He doubted anyone was waiting for him but they were sure to notice if he didn't show up at all. He arrived just in time to hear Gobber finish the story of how he lost his limbs.</p>

"Hey guys," he greeted, stepping forward from the shadows and causing several of them to jump — he hadn't realized how silent he had been.

Snotlout scowled at him, annoyed at having been startled, and then promptly ignored him, turning back to Gobber. "I swear I'm so angry right now. I'll avenge your beautiful hand and your beautiful foot," he promised. "I'll chop off the legs of every dragon I fight, with my face."

"Un-unh. It's the wings and the tails you really want. If it can't fly, it can't get away," Gobber responded, finally turning away from Hiccup, who he had been staring at searchingly. "A downed dragon is a dead dragon."

Hiccup half nodded to himself, remembering back on that time so long ago when he had first met Toothless and the helpless state the dragon had been in.

Gobber stood and stretched, throwing Hiccup a look. "Don't be late again," he warned him before turning back to the recruits. "I'm off to bed. You should be too. Tomorrow we get into the big boys. Slowly but surely making our way up to the Monstrous Nightmare. But who'll win the honor of killing it?"

He hobbled off and the teens began boasting about who would get the honor of killing the dragon. Hiccup felt sick, staring at his food morosely as he listened to them easily discuss the taking of another's life. As their conversation side-tracked into other things Hiccup followed after Gobber. There really was no point in remaining while their instructor was gone; it wasn't like anyone would bother to speak to him, not to mention that he didn't even want to participate in the conversation.

\* \* \*

><p>The next morning Hiccup left Berk early, rising with the sun. Toothless was still sleeping when he arrived at The Cove, curled up on his charred spot of grass that had long since cooled, and Hiccup headed straight for him, smiling at the sight as he took up his usual pose leaning against his best friend.</p>

The Night Fury shifted slightly, opening one eye to stare at Hiccup. '\_What are you doing up so early?' he grumbled, closing his eye and shifting into a more comfortable position for Hiccup.

'\_Couldn't sleep\_,' he responded, leaning back and gazing at the sky. '\_I couldn't stop thinking about how we're going to get those dragons

out of there\_. '

Toothless yawned, opening both eyes and picking up his head to stare at Hiccup. '\_I still say you can't get them all out at once,\_' he told him.

Hiccup nodded. '\_Yeah, you were right about that,\_' he conceded. '\_I just can't figure out which order. As soon as they notice one is gone they're sure to add more security.\_'

'\_Make it look like an accident,\_' Toothless suggested.

Hiccup shook his head. '\_That will only work with the first one or two.\_'

'\_You'll never know until you try. Get the Terror out tonight and see what happens.\_'

The Viking teenager was silent for a while, thinking about what he was going to do and running through the scenarios in his mind.

'\_Alright,\_' he finally agreed, standing. '\_You going to give me a lift back?\_' he asked playfully, grinning.

Toothless grumbled slightly, getting to his feet and stretching out his wings. '\_You were the one who had to get up so early,\_' he protested half-heartedly.

Hiccup's grin widened â€“ neither of them would ever pass up an opportunity to fly with the other â€“ and he leapt aboard the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself. Neither of them spoke on the short ride back to the outskirts of Berk and Hiccup leapt off lightly while Toothless was still in the air. He straightened up, giving a quick wave to Toothless as the dragon headed out over the ocean to look for breakfast.

\* \* \*

><p>"Today is about teamwork," Gobber announced as they paired up, Hiccup predictably partnered with Fishlegs. "Work together and you might survive." He threw open the door to the Hideous Zippleback's cage and gas immediately flooded the arena, covering the teens. Hiccup grinned, this was his element. "Now, a wet dragon head can't light its fire. The Hideous Zippleback is extra tricky. One head breathes gas, the other head lights it. Your job is to know which is which."<p>

Hiccup closed his eyes, relying on his other senses to track the Zippleback around the arena, trying to block out Fishlegs' muttering beside him. "Shhh!" he chided, opening eyes as he listened to Snotlout and Tuffnut mistake Astrid and Ruffnut's shadowy forms for the dragon.

Fishlegs ceased his mutterings as the two groups began to fight and Hiccup tensed, longing to circle around and avoid the dragon but instead forced to remain with his partner. He heard the swish of the dragon's tail and the subsequent thudding as the teens were caught off guard and knocked to the ground.

"Chances of survival are dwindling into single digits nowâ€|" Fishlegs voiced pessimistically as they watched the other recruits

head out of the arena.

Hiccup ignored him, listening hard for the dragon. "Look out!" he warned as the gas-spewing head approached.

Fishlegs panicked before he could say anything else, throwing his water and drenching the head. The dragon merely leered at him, spewing more gas, and Fishlegs fled in terror leaving Hiccup alone in the ring.

As the second head appeared above Hiccup he heard Gobber yell for him and threw his water at the dragon, purposely missing the head. The Zippleback grinned at the apparently easy kill but Hiccup just smirked right back, using the cover of the gas to show the Zippleback the eel under his vest. The dragon sniffed the air, confirming what he saw, before hissing loudly and drawing back, retreating so far as to back itself into its cage. Hiccup walked forward to shut the cage, smiling sadly, and turned to find everybody staring at him.

"Are we done?" he asked nervously. "I've got to!" he jerked his thumb, indicating he had to go somewhere, and trailed off, uncomfortable with all the stares. "Right, um! see you tomorrow." He fled, unhappy with the attention he had brought to himself, and quickly made his way to the Cove ready to plan out the rescue of the Terrible Terror.

### 3. Beginning the Rescues

Both Hiccup and Toothless agreed that it would be pointless to wait. Hiccup needed the light to make the "escape" look like an accident and they wanted to avoid the Vikings who were feeding the dragons so they didn't spend long refining their plan before leaving the Cove. They flew easily to the ring, both of them heading inside, not worried about being seen. The ring was isolated enough that as long as they flew low no one from the village would spot them but Hiccup was still worried about how long the plan would take. Feeding took place around the same time every day but Vikings didn't know the meaning of punctual - they fed the dragons when they felt like it and Hiccup didn't know when that would be today.

He hurried inside and, upon entering the arena, hurried over to the Terror's cage, quickly searching the tool belt he had constructed for the proper tools. Before he got to work though, he first pulled the lever, opening the cage door and releasing the Terror.

It scurried out quickly, hissing all the while, but stopped as soon as it saw Toothless. Puzzled, the dragon froze, cocking its head as it started at the much larger Night Fury.

Off to the side, unnoticed by the dragon, Hiccup spoke up. '\_Calm down, this is a rescue, not an attack\_,' he said with a grin, amused by the Terror's actions. Terrors were regularly mischievous dragons but could become quite ferocious when threatened not quite formidable, given their size, but they knew how to use their small stature to their advantage, a fact Hiccup knew all too well. However, Terrors also weren't the smartest of dragons and the sight of the rare Night Fury was more than enough to confuse the trapped creature.

The Terror turned its head toward him, noticing him for the first time. Hiccup held up his hands. '\_We're getting you out of here.\_' he repeated, smiling at the small dragon.

'\_Truly\_?' the Terror asked, uncertain about the fact that a Viking was about to help him to gain his freedom but also trusting the strange young human who spoke Dragonese and smelled so much like a dragon. Hiccup nodded and the Terror reacted by flapping his small wings and perching himself on Hiccup's shoulder. He growled his thanks and Hiccup reached up to scratch the dragon's neck, leaving him purring in delight.

Toothless nudged him, reminding him of his task, and Hiccup refocused, kneeling down next to the trap door. He fiddled with it for a good fifteen minutes, Toothless watching anxiously and the Terror resting on his shoulders, but eventually finished his task. He gave the door one good kick, watching as it fell apart in a way that suggested it had broken under the onslaught of the small dragon. He had loosened all the bolts - or exchanged them for worn and deteriorated ones - and no one would suspect that any human had been involved, especially because a Terror could easily slip out of the arena unseen.

Satisfied with his work Hiccup looked around the arena one more time, making sure he hadn't left any tools or extra bolts behind. Inspection complete he hopped upon Toothless, setting the Terror in front of him as the black dragon ran out of the arena, leaping off the cliff and flying away safely. Near the Cove, away from Berk and its inhabitants, Hiccup finally let out a loud whoop, yelling into the air. Beneath him Toothless growled in agreement, executing a wide loop in midair to convey his own satisfaction. As Hiccup held onto the Terror to keep him from falling off he felt the smaller dragon too purring in happiness and couldn't help but grin wildly as they leveled out. They had done it!

He let loose a small laugh as they landed in the Cove, unsure of how to express his excitement. He had rescued a dragon from the Vikings of Berk - stolen it out from under their very noses. Sure he had saved dragons before, shook them from their thrall, caught in the Queen's mind, but never before had he saved a dragon that the Vikings had already captured.

'\_Welcome to your new home\_!' he announced proudly to the Terror - who had hopped off of Toothless' back to get a drink from the lake. Still bubbling with excitement, Hiccup couldn't sit still. '\_Make yourself at home, Toothless and I are going flying.\_' he told the Terror, more than aware that he could never keep up with them. Hopping once more aboard his dragon they took off into the sky, twirling upward as they let loose their excitement.

The dragon and his rider flew for some time, expelling energy by practicing some of the harder moves in midair, Hiccup jumping off or standing in the saddle, Toothless attempting to glide upside (with Hiccup still seated) or fly on his side. Eventually, as the sun began to sink in the sky, they settled down on a part of Berk that they still hadn't explored yet. Hiccup didn't even care that he was missing dinner with the other teens, more than willing to take whatever punishment Gobber would decide to give him - it wasn't like he hadn't already experienced them all before, earned or unearned.

As Toothless took off again to go fishing Hiccup began to gather firewood, setting up a place to cook his own meal as he explored the grassy slopes of the mountain, searching for caves. Unfortunately for the young Viking, this was a place he had yet to explore and he was unaware that there were indeed caves nearby - caves in which a very territorial Bullrougher lived. Bullroughers were pretty rare on Berk and tended to live in grassy, mountainous lairs in large caves. They also happened to have one very sharp two foot horn on their foreheads, which they used to charge at their victims.

Caught unaware Hiccup was the direct target of such a charge, barely jumping away at the last minute thanks to his many years rough housing with dragons. He fell to the ground with a shout of pain, wincing at the glancing blow to his upper left arm, and glanced at the dragon that had charged past him. It had stopped its charge, turning again to face him and snorting a warning. '\_Stay off my land\_!'

Hiccup couldn't help but wince again as he saw the horn that had injured him. He knew without a doubt that if he hadn't moved he would be lying face down in the dirt - dead - and for the first time he truly appreciated how much his reflexes had changed from practically living among dragons.

Before he could say anything, however, he head the telltale sign of a Night Fury approaching and grinned, watching as a ball of purple lightning lit up the ground next to the Bullrougher. As Toothless landed in front of him Hiccup realized that it wasn't just his dragon that had changed him, but that he had also changed his dragon. Night Furies never missed. Never. And yet Toothless had, not because of bad aim but because he knew that Hiccup would have been against harming the wild dragon, no matter what said dragon had done to him.

As the two dragons growled at each other Hiccup winced from his spot on the ground, propping himself up with his uninjured arm. '\_Stop\_!' he cried, worried that Toothless would get hurt in the ensuing fight. The other dragon didn't react, still growling menacingly at Toothless, but the Night Fury backed down, looking worriedly at Hiccup. '\_Look, I'm sorry we intruded on your territory, we didn't know\_,' he insisted. The Bullrougher growled menacingly. '\_We're going to leave\_,' Hiccup told it, standing slowly, '\_and I promise we won't come back\_.' He walked slowly to Toothless, the wild dragon still watching his every move, and painfully got into the saddle, holding his left arm in his right.

Toothless took off as gently as possible, trying not to jostle Hiccup too much, and headed straight for the Cove, not glancing back. He took quick smooth strokes, neither of them speaking as Toothless concentrated on remaining as still as possible. Eventually they reached their destination and Hiccup slid off Toothless, pale from blood loss. He leaned on his dragon as he headed to the lean-to, gathering bandages and herbs for his wound. Given his clumsy nature and the fact that he ran into wild dragons every other day this wasn't the first time Hiccup had sustained an injury during their adventures. It was however, one of the worst injuries he had ever gotten and, aware of the dangers of blood loss, he quickly wrapped it, grabbing a pot to fill with water. He staggered out the door, barely aware of Toothless' concerned gaze or the Terror's confused one.

Toothless immediately realized what Hiccup was doing. '\_Help me,\_' he growled at the Terror as he began to move wood from Hiccup's pile of firewood to the fire pit. By the time Hiccup had managed to drag the pot of water to the fire pit a fire had already been started, much hotter than any fire he could have started himself. With Toothless supporting him he managed to get the pot hanging over the fire, steam rising as a little splashed out.

He sat down immediately after, Toothless lying down behind him, and leaned back on the dragon - exhausted and in pain. The Terror curled up next to him, nudging him in concern, and Hiccup gave a weak smile. He closed his eyes, taking deep breathes to get through the pain, and groaned when he realized he still had dragon training tomorrow. '\_Sorry,' he mumbled without opening his eyes. '\_I didn't mean to wander off.\_'

The Night Fury snorted, carefully not to move too much. '\_I shouldn't have left,\_' he corrected Hiccup. '\_We've never been to that part of the island before.\_'

'\_You didn't know I'd wander off,\_' Hiccup mumbled half-heartedly, too exhausted to get into the argument of whose fault it was but also adamant that Toothless had done nothing wrong.

Toothless held back another snort. '\_You're Hiccup, you always wander off,\_' he said, amused.

Hiccup hummed lightly in agreement and amusement, too exhausted to say any more. Toothless let him rest, nudging him only when he could hear the water beginning to boil. He didn't snuff out the fire, aware that Hiccup was shivering slightly, but he knew the water would have to be cooled before Hiccup used it. Carefully, he used his tail to pick up the bucket by the handle Hiccup had used to hand it over the fire. He set it down beside Hiccup, stopping him when he reached for it distractedly.

The Viking blinked, realizing he had been about to burn himself, and sat up, wincing slightly. He slowly unwrapped the bandage he had wrapped over his shirt, pausing as he realized he would have to remove his shirt. He groaned again, leaning forward and slowly shrugging off his vest. Holding his left arm firmly to his side he struggled to remove his right arm, finally getting it over his head. From there he carefully peeled it off his left arm, inspecting the cut for the first time. It was both long and deep, going almost from his shoulder to his elbow, and Hiccup winced at the sight of it, just as both dragons hissed. He carefully dipped a rag into the hot water, wincing once more as he rubbed it against his wound.

When he finally finished cleaning it the wound was bleeding slightly once more and he hurriedly rubbed his salve in, quickly but firmly wrapping it once more. He didn't bother with fetching a fresh shirt, leaning back again as he rested once more. He closed his eyes as the Terror curled up at his side but didn't fall asleep, new thoughts racing through his mind. Despite the injury, Hiccup's good mood from earlier hadn't completely faded. He was exhausted and in pain but that had never stopped him before and it wasn't about to stop him now. Ideas of how he was going to deal with his injury - and dragon training - were running through his head, one after the other, until he finally came to one that he thought would work.

Excited he quickly sat up, ignoring the twinge from his wound. '\_Perfect!\_' He exclaimed distractedly in Dragonese - a language that had eventually replaced Norse as his default language.

Behind him Toothless lifted his head, staring at Hiccup expectantly, recognizing the boy's look. '\_I'm not going to like this, am I?\_' he asked, well aware that if Hiccup had concocted a plan to deal with his injury it likely didn't take Hiccup's own pain into account.

Unfortunately Toothless' thoughts were correct and Hiccup had come up with a clever plan to free another dragon and reveal his injury to Berk while at the same time suffering pain and humiliation as his own part of the plan. Toothless growled lightly but knew that nothing he could say would convince Hiccup to change his mind. Besides, it was a good plan, no one would suspect Hiccup of helping the dragon to escape, nor would they question Hiccup's injury, but that didn't mean that Toothless had to like it.

Together the two dragons and one Viking plotted, refining the details and slumbering together under the stars. Hiccup didn't bother to head back to Berk and join the other teens for dinner - for the first time since dragon training began he didn't care about keeping up appearances. Gobber would probably admonish him when he showed up tomorrow morning but he couldn't bring himself to care, it wasn't like anyone missed him anyway, they were actually probably glad he wasn't there, or, even more likely, they hadn't even noticed he was absent. With these thoughts Hiccup set up his hammock, falling asleep with Toothless beside him and the Terror curled up next to him.

\* \* \*

><p>The next morning Hiccup returned to find the village gossiping about the missing Terror, admonishing themselves for not checking the doors more often. He was glad to hear that nobody suspected outside involvement, easily accepting that the Terror had made his escape due to old bolts and a faulty door. Hiccup passed by them all unseen, meeting up with Gobber and the other teens and making sure to keep his left arm away from them. He was counting on his status as 'Hiccup the Useless' to keep them from noticing that his injured arm was remaining stiffly by his side. Luckily Gobber was more distracted by the fact that Hiccup hadn't joined them last night and said so.</p>

Hiccup shifted uncomfortably. "Sorry, I ... I uh, went for a walk in the woods," he improvised, well aware that it would have been pitch black by the time the other Vikings had finished their dinner.

"It was dark," Gobber deadpanned, giving him a disappointed glare - something Hiccup was more than used to.

Gaining confidence at the familiarity of the conversation Hiccup shrugged, holding back a wince as he belatedly remembered his injury. "I got lost," he said, making sure he sounded appropriately embarrassed.

Thankfully it worked, the teens snickering behind him and making jokes about he probably got lost in his own home. Hiccup ignored them as always, well aware that he could run circles around them in that

forest. Given how often he left Berk he knew the woods like the back of his hand, and maybe even better than he knew Berk.

Gobber also accepted his excuse, scolding him for several more minutes before leading them to the ring. Due to the fact that the Terrible Terror had 'escaped' they would be working once more with the Deadly Nadder, this time without the maze.

Hiccup tried to remain out of the way, skirting the edge of the ring in order to prevent anyone from noticing his injury, but he couldn't stop the Nadder from charging him. As he ran through his compilation of tricks, hoping to stop the Nadder without hurting it, the Nadder stopped in front of him.

The confused Viking watched anxiously as the equally confused dragon sniffed him curiously, obviously finding something unusual.

Distracted, Hiccup almost spoke in Dragonese to question the dragon but he caught himself just in time. Unfortunately his distracted mind proved ill for the Nadder as Hiccup hadn't realized that Astrid was approaching with her axe, once again hitting the Nadder with the flat side of her weapon. The dragon squawked a shriek of pain and the lesson ended as Gobber once again forced it into the cage. He grinned slightly, time to execute the plan.

\* \* \*

><p>As they left the arena the teens gathered around Astrid, congratulating her on her successful attack, and Hiccup lagged behind the others, waiting until they turned the corner before he turned around and jogged back to the ring. He stopped by the entrance, whistling lightly, and Toothless flew up from his hiding spot beneath the cliff to land lightly beside him. Hiccup went immediately to the saddle where his torn and bloody shirt from earlier was tied down. He changed quickly, removing his bandages and replacing his clean shirt with the ripped one, not bothering to be gentle. Though it was painful to move his arm he needed the wound to look fresh, which would work best if it reopened.</p>

Toothless shifted uncomfortably as he saw the blood dripping down Hiccup's arm but he didn't say anything. He knew this was the best plan yet but he hated that Hiccup had to suffer for it. He walked down to the arena, helping Hiccup to open the cage door, before leaving Hiccup alone. He flew off again, prepared to execute his part in the plan, but he hated that it was such a small part. 'Not small to Hiccup,' he reminded himself. Besides, if he didn't help get the Nadder to safety then all of Hiccup's efforts would be for naught and he wasn't about to let that happen.

Back in the ring Hiccup had opened the Nadder's cage door. It hissed loudly but he held up his hands, wincing all the while. '\_I'm here to help,\_' he said. '\_I've got a plan to get you out of here but you've got to follow along.\_'

The Nadder cocked her head, interested. '\_I'm listening boy,\_' she said distrustfully.

'\_We're going to pretend I was fighting you,\_' Hiccup spoke quickly, knowing that the teens and Gobber were getting farther and farther away. '\_You're going to knock me out, then make sure you roar loud enough for everyone to hear. After that you can leave, but it'd help

if you flew over the village, making sure they can see you. There's a Night Fury waiting for you on the other side of Berk, he'll lead you somewhere safe.\_'

'\_Why must I be seen?\_' the Nadder asked, warily, '\_And why must I hurt you?\_'

'\_I'll explain everything later,\_' Hiccup told her, '\_just try to open my wound when you knock me out.\_' The Nadder shifted uncomfortably but agreed, desperate to escape.

Hiccup closed his eyes, trying to relax his body as he anticipated the blow, and the Nadder swung around, using her tail to send Hiccup flying through the air and against the wall. As Hiccup sunk into unconsciousness the Nadder sniffed him, worried that she may have hit him too hard, and then brushed her tail against his wound, opening it more.

\* \* \*

><p>The next thing Hiccup knew Gobber was leaning over him, shaking him awake. He winced, blinking his eyes rapidly as they adjusted to the sudden influx of light - which certainly wasn't helping his headache - and noticed that the rest of the teens had followed Gobber. For probably the first and last time in their lives they were looking at him in concern.</p>

"Hiccup!" Gobber yelled as he closed his eyes again. "What happened? We saw the Nadder fly by."

Hiccup groaned, grateful for the wall behind him that propped him up. He opened his eyes again, much more reluctantly this time as he prepared what he considered was the worst part of the plan. He was about to play into the entire village's perception of him: a weak and clumsy mistake of a Viking who would never be able to handle a dragon. "I was—" he paused, coughing. "I was just trying to train," he managed to say weakly. "I thought—" he coughed again, wincing as he sat up. "I thought it would be good practice."

Now that it seemed he wasn't going to die anytime soon the teens dropped their concerned stares and Gobber eyed him disappointingly. "You should know better than that," he scolded.

Hiccup winced, sitting up further and checking that his wound had stopped bleeding. If anyone would see through his act it would be Gobber. "I... I just want to make my dad proud," he stammered, aware of how vulnerable that would make him to his peers but also aware that it was his best chance of convincing Gobber.

The blacksmith simply shook his head, helping Hiccup up. "C'mon, let's get you to the healer," he said, leading Hiccup out of the ring. Behind them Hiccup could hear the teens laughing at his failure but that only strengthened his resolve, solidifying his belief that he had done the right thing - no one was even thinking about the Deadly Nadder that had escaped, instead focusing solely on Hiccup's failure.

\* \* \*

><p>Back in the village the healer barely looked over Hiccup's wound,

more than used to the teen's mishaps, and for that Hiccup was grateful. An experienced mind would more than be able to tell that the wound was not merely minutes old and had in fact already been treated. Luckily the man barely even glanced at Hiccup as he distractedly wrapped the injury, choosing to speak with Gobber instead.<p>

"Should have expected something like this â€“ putting him in dragon training?" the man shook his head, completely ignoring the fact that Hiccup was sitting right there.

Gobber too ignored Hiccup, nodding his head. "Aye, but it would have happened sooner or later. Better now than in a raid."

Hiccup didn't know whether to wince at the harsh words or smirk at the fact that he had managed to fool all of them. He chose instead to speak up in his usual sarcastic manner. "I am right here you know," he deadpanned, not surprised when neither of his elders looked his way. He sighed lightly, leaving the house now that his wound was treated, before quickly poking his head back in. "Does this excuse me from dragon training?" he asked.

Of course Gobber had to hear that. "Not a chance lad," he replied, giving Hiccup a stern glance before continuing his conversation.

Hiccup mentally shrugged. 'Oh well, it was worth a try.' He knew everyone was expecting him to return to his own house and rest, exhausted by his injury, but he was planning to take advantage of that â€“ nobody would expect him at dinner tonight. Shrugging off the remains of his pain from the Nadder's hit he hurried out of Berk, silently making his way to the Cove. It was time to explain everything to the Nadder and go for a nice relaxing flight with his own dragon.

As always he smiled at the very thought of Toothless, lithely slipping between the rocks at the entrance to his home away from home. 'Actually, it's probably more of a home than Berk is,' he thought as Toothless greeted him, worriedly questioning him about his injuries.

He pushed the large black head away from him, smiling. '\_I'm fine bud,\_' he insisted, shifting accommodatingly as the Terror perched itself on his right shoulder, nudging his head. He reached up and scratched the small dragon under the chin as he continued to console Toothless, displaying his bandaged arm. '\_Look, the healer took care of it, I'm \_fine,' he emphasized once more.

Toothless just glared at him. '\_Don't ever do that again,\_' he demanded.

Hiccup chuckled at the Night Fury's over-protectiveness, '\_I promise to never purposely injure myself again,\_' he joked.

'\_That's not exactly reassuring,\_' Toothless returned in a similar joking manner, lightening up slightly.

Hiccup grinned, glad that his friend wasn't mad at him, and turned to the Deadly Nadder who had been watching the exchange curiously.

'\_You are a Viking,\_' she said, '\_and yet you speak our tongue and smell of us.\_'

The Viking in question paused, not expecting that comment. '\_Is that why you paused in the ring?\_' he asked, having never thought about his smell before. The Nadder gave the dragon equivalent of a nod, growling in agreement, and Hiccup turned to Toothless. '\_Do I really smell like a dragon?\_'

'\_You have spent far more time in our company than theirs,\_' Toothless responded. '\_There are few distinct Viking scents on you, and even those are faint.\_'

'\_Huh, I never even thought about that,\_' Hiccup said, stunned. '\_I spend more time with dragons so I smell like a dragon.\_' The Terror on his shoulder chirped in agreement and Hiccup smiled. '\_Well I suppose there's nothing wrong with smelling like a dragon.\_'

'\_Not at all,\_' Toothless growled in approval of Hiccup's acceptance. '\_Much better than when I first met you â€“ there were even fewer distinct scents then, but now you have mine\_.\_'

The possessiveness in his voice made Hiccup's grin widen and he placed his hand on his friend's head. '\_And I suppose you have mine.\_' The Night Fury growled in agreement and Hiccup gave his dragon a one armed hug before turning back to the Nadder. '\_Alright, I suppose I owe you an explanation.\_'

Hiccup began to detail his plan, starting with the accident that had happened yesterday. He described the Bullrougher's territorial attitude, explaining all about how he had actually gotten the wound in the first place, before he went into the actual plan. '\_I already rescued this little guy and made it look like an accident but I knew if I did that every time they would suspect something,\_' he explained. '\_So I decided to use my injury to make it look like I had been overpowered by a dragon. I need you to make the wound look fresh and I asked you to fly over the village so that the other teens would see you and turn back - I wanted them to catch me in the act, leaving no doubt as to what happened.\_'

'\_And they believed it?\_' the Nadder asked skeptically, finding Hiccup to be a very impressive and capable young Viking.

Hiccup snorted in reply. 'Why was it only the dragons who seemed to realize just how capable he actually was? They made the Vikings of Berk seem impossibly oblivious - though, thinking about it, it wasn't actually that hard,' Hiccup mused before answering the Nadder. '\_Of course they did,\_' he replied in a joking tone, '\_to them I'm known as the incredible Hiccup the Useless.\_' He grinned, able to joke about his nickname in a manner that surprised even him. Befriending Toothless had done more than enough to prove to him that he wasn't useless and he was much more capable of joking about the insults thrown his way than he would have been otherwise. But the Nadder didn't know any of this and was surprised by his casual nonchalance.

Hiccup just shrugged it off, describing what had happened after the Nadder left, both for the blue dragon's sake and for Toothless'. Once finished Hiccup mentioned that it was time for a flight and the

Nadder decided to join them, truly stretching her wings as they maneuvered around each other and raced late into the night.

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><p><strong>AN: <strong>Wow, can I just say I never expected such a response to this story? I'm glad you guys like it and I hope you approve of the direction I've taken it, we're slowly pulling away from the movie until we leave it altogether so let me know what you think!

Thanks to MidnightSunset35, 9foxgrl, Allyieh, mr abomination, asia2000lover, Miles-tails-prowler, demonsLOver, great-growlithe-gamer, TheNiemand, Dragons-Sister, and SpazzyLassy105 for reviewing! And thanks to everyone who put this story on their favorites or follows list!

#### 4. The Vikings Return

After their flight Hiccup and Toothless spent more time planning on how to rescue the three remaining dragons. Hiccup was adamant that he should get out the Gronckle the very next night, but Toothless didn't agree.

'\_The Vikings are still distracted by the Nadder,\_' Hiccup argued, '\_they haven't checked the rest of the doors since the Terror's escape.\_'

Toothless knew perfectly well that Hiccup was correct, but he also knew perfectly well that Hiccup was injured. '\_You're left handed,\_' he growled right back, '\_and you'll need to use your left hand to use your tools.\_'

Hiccup shrugged, frustrated by his friend's over-protectiveness. '\_So it'll take longer than usual, doesn't mean I can't do it.\_'

Toothless shook his head. '\_And if you wait another day you'll be much faster.\_'

'\_But if I wait another day they'll have checked the doors,\_' Hiccup reminded the dragon.

The Night Fury grumbled but couldn't deny the truth in the Vikings words. They continued to hash out the plan as night fell, detailing every little part of the Gronckle's escape, before finally moving onto the topic of the last two dragons.

'\_This is the last time this plan will work,\_' Hiccup concluded, '\_after this they're sure to check the doors and make everything doubly secure. And if we get the Nightmare out before Astrid gets the honor of killing it\_ ' â€“ for he had no doubt that Astrid would win â€“ '\_then they'll just get another dragon for her to kill.\_'

'\_So you want to get the Nightmare out the night before the kill?\_'  
Toothless asked, incredulously.

Hiccup shook his head. '\_I don't know. After we get the Zippelback out there are sure to be guards. All four dragons escaping? They

wouldn't risk losing the Nightmare as well.\_' He looked through the flickering firelight to see the Nadder and the Terror snoozing together on the rocks. He had gotten them both out safely but he knew they were damaged from their time in the ring. They had chosen to stay with him instead of flying off into the wild â€“ to potentially be captured again or caught in their Queen's thrall.

He was aware of just how much trust they were placing in him â€“ trusting him to keep them safe â€“ but could he repay that trust? Could he rescue their fellow dragons or would he loose them to the Vikings' ferocity? He didn't know.

Toothless, aware of Hiccup's melancholy gaze, nudged the teen gently, jolting him free from his thoughts. '\_We'll get them out,\_' the dragon said fondly, '\_you'll think of something. You always do.\_'

Hiccup nodded blankly, leaning against Toothless as he drifted off for the night.

\* \* \*

><p>The next day Hiccup was thankful for his wound, which allowed him to hang back behind the other teens as they faced the Gronckle once more. Unfortunately the Gronckle got no such message and charged him, forcing Hiccup to reach up and knock out the round dragon, scratching her scaly chin and effectively ending their time in the arena.</p>

Ever aware of his wound, Hiccup was forced to walk slowly along with the Viking teenagers as they clamored around him. This was the second time he had taken out a dragon and everyone wanted to know how he did it with no apparent force. He held off their questions for a short while before using the excuse that he had left his axe in the ring. The teens sent him puzzled looks but nobody followed as he returned in the direction they had come from.

As soon as he had rounded the corner to the arena Hiccup dove off the ledge. He knew that Toothless was waiting for him underneath and couldn't be bothered to wait much longer to free the Gronckle. He whistled slightly, watching as Toothless dove after him, the two falling side by side. Nearing the ground, Hiccup positioned himself in the saddle, the two pulling up at the last minute and gliding over the surface beneath them.

Together they quickly swooped around, flying easily through the sky as they circled the ring several times. '\_This is getting to be too much Toothless\_, ' Hiccup admitted. '\_I don't know how much longer I can pretend that I'm one of them. They swarmed me today after I had to take down the Gronckle â€“ and it was just too much.\_' As they landed in front of the ring Hiccup sighed, hopping off Toothless and leaning against his best friend. '\_It's the most anyone has wanted to talk to me in years and every word coming out of my mouth is a lie.\_'

'\_You've been lying to them for years,\_' Toothless tried to comfort his friend as they opened the gate.

Hiccup shook his head. '\_And no one actually bothered to listen to what I had to say then. I wasn't really lying, I just left and they

never bothered to follow.\_' They walked to the Gronckle cage, Hiccup examining it closely. '\_Now they all want to talk to me and I â€œ I don't know how to deal with that.\_'

As Hiccup readied himself to pull the lever Toothless nudged him. '\_It'll be over soon. Then everything can go back to how it used to be. Besides, is it so bad that everyone finally notices how wonderful you are?\_'

Hiccup blushed and shrugged, uncertain of how to respond. Instead he chose to pull the lever, releasing the Gronckle and effectively ending the conversation.

The dragon burst out of its cage, glancing around wildly before resting her eyes on Hiccup. She flew over to him, her expression the dragon equivalent of a grin, and Hiccup knew she was expecting to be scratched again. He scratched her lightly on her neck, explaining the plan as he did so. The Gronckle readily agreed, watching as Hiccup fiddled with the door for a good half hour. When he finally finished she returned to the inside of her cage, watching as he closed the door once more. Thanks to his intervention however, one good hit and the door broke down.

She growled her thanks and Hiccup gestured up toward the chain roof. '\_Do you think you can squeeze through those chains?\_'

The Gronckle looked up, growling an assent before flying upward with a burst of speed, squeezing through the biggest gap in the chains. Hiccup grinned at the dragon's achievement, following Toothless out the door of the arena. Once shut he hopped on his black dragon, the two of them taking flight and leading the Gronckle on a merry chase away from Berk. Gronckles weren't the fastest of dragons but her happiness gave the freed Gronckle an extra burst of speed and Hiccup and Toothless remembered to restrain themselves as they led her to the Cove.

\* \* \*

><p>When Hiccup returned early the next morning the village was in uproar about the third escaped dragon. Vikings were berating themselves (and each other) for not double checking the doors after the Terror's escape. Hiccup was just thankful that dragon training was canceled so the villagers could reinforce the doors to the two remaining dragons' cages.</p>

Unfortunately Gobber didn't get the memo, and decided that even if they couldn't train with the dragons they could still train. He gathered up the six teenagers, leading them to a meadow in the woods and handing each of them an axe.

"Today we'll be training for strength, not accuracy," he told them, "just throw as far as you can." As Snotlout prepared to throw his axe Gobber stopped him, gazing down sternly at the teen. "One at a time," he admonished Hiccup's cousin. "Astrid, you're first."

As the teens got ready â€“ Astrid stretched; Ruffnut and Tuffnut pushed and shoved each other, sneering about which one of them was better; Snotlout boasted of his abilities loudly; and Fishlegs stood silently to the side â€“ Hiccup looked down at the axe in his hand. He could throw it, of that he had no doubt, but it would be an

awkward throw, flimsy at best. Axe throwing was just not something that he had practiced in the years he had gotten to know Toothless. Give him a knife any day, but an axeâ€¦

He looked up as Astrid threw hers, accurately and strongly, the axe sticking in a tree at the edge of the meadow. Snotlout cheered, praising Astrid as always, and Gobber turned to Hiccup.

"Alright Hiccup, you're up next," he told him.

Hiccup looked again at the axe in his hand. Give it his best and surprise them somewhat or chicken out and struggle to throw it?

"He'll probably just drop it," Snotlout sniggered as Hiccup paused for too long, the twins laughing and agreeing with him.

'That's it!' Hiccup thought, he was not going to take any more insults, he was tired of pretending, and he was tired of everybody laughing at him. He copied Astrid's pose as best he could, reaching back and hurling the axe. It wouldn't be accurate but he put as much power into it as he could, watching as the axe dropped three-fourths of the way through the meadow.

There was a stunned silence as the Vikings had their expectations completely smashed and Hiccup winced. 'That probably wasn't the smartest thing to do,' he thought, gripping his upper left arm in his right hand, grateful for the bandage under his shirt. Astrid was giving him suspicious looks again and Snotlout seemed to be speechless. Fishlegs was staring at him and the twins had momentarily stopped their fighting. Even Gobber seemed to be surprised.

"Must be all those muscles from working in the forge," Gobber concluded, turning to Snotlout. "You're next Jorgenson."

Hiccup held back a snort as the attention turned to Snotlout. 'Sure, all that time in the forge \_must \_be the answer. I couldn't possibly be good at something.' He shook his head. 'Snap out of it Hiccup,' he admonished himself. 'You're going to regret this.' And already he did. Not only had he taken out a dragon twice but he had displayed acrobatics none of them were expecting and now he had shown strength no one was expecting.

For the rest of their training together he held back, barely throwing the axe, clumsily handling the knife, and struggling with the shield. Everyone â€œ especially Snotlout â€œ was more than happy to pass off his first throw as a fluke and Hiccup was quick to use his injury as an excuse when Gobber got curious. By the time they finished only Astrid was still suspicious, cornering him as they left the meadow.

"I normally don't care what people do, but you're acting weird. Well, weirder. I want to know what's going on. No one just gets as good as you do. Especially you," she threatened. "Are you training with someone?"

'Alright Hiccup,' the dragon rider told himself, 'play it cool â€œ act nervous and pretend like you don't have any clue what she's talking about.' "Training?" he said out loud, cowering slightly. "What do you mean? Didn'tâ€¦ didn't you seeâ€¦" he gestured feebly

toward the meadow. "I could barely even lift the shield!"

Astrid snarled. "Except everyone seems to be forgetting that you lifted it just fine the first day of training!"

Hiccup fumbled, not faking the nervousness this time. 'Oh man, I can't believe I forgot that! Way to go Hiccup,' he scolded himself. "Yeahâ€| well, uh, well I â€| I wasn't injured then," he managed, barely coming up with an excuse in time.

Not quick enough though. Astrid punched him, sending him to the ground. "That's for the lies," she said before dropping her axe on him. "And that's for everything else."

Hiccup yelped as the axe hit him but his only thoughts were for his dragon. 'Man I'm really glad Toothless didn't see this,' he thought as he lay on the ground, watching as Astrid followed after her peers, 'he would have killed her.' When she had disappeared from sight he got up slowly, ignoring the path the other teens had followed and turning around, heading straight for the Cove.

As he traveled silently through the woods plans flew in and out of his brain: ways to fool Astrid, what to tell Toothless when he got to the Cove, plans to convincingly let Astrid win at dragon training, what to tell his Dad when Stoick returned. As Hiccup headed into the Cove all the plans left his mind as he stared happily at the three dragons he had rescued, the three of them lounging together near the lake. 'Whatever else happens, at least I made a difference,' he told himself, looking down into the Cove and reminiscing.

Hiccup hadn't yet named the three dragons â€" excluding Toothless it usually took him a while to get a name for a dragon â€" but there were quite a few dragons he had named over the years.

Scarlet, Dawn, and Fang were three mischievous young Terrors he had known for a while. Forge was another, older Terror, whom Hiccup often snuck into the forge with him at night, using the tiny dragon's flame to heat the fire hotter than he could â€" given the limited time he had for his secret projects.

Midnight was the first dragon he had freed from the Queen's thrall, a deep purple Nadder who still lived fairly close to Berk. Hiccup had freed her mate a year after that. Blizzard was a light blue and yellow Nadder who loved to fly through the storms for which he was named. Together they had three young dragons, Shadow â€" a darker purple than his mother â€" Snowball â€" so light blue she was almost white with purple tipped wings â€" and Spike â€" a common blue with yellow wing mix.

Hiccup also knew of a common Changewing nesting spot, an island not far from Berk. Though he hadn't named all the dragons there, there were two â€" Mist and Shortsnout â€" who enjoyed seeing him.

There were many dragons Hiccup had freed over the years, and even more he had met, but not all dragons liked to live in the same place year after year â€" especially with such obvious threats nearby. He hadn't seen Fireworm â€" a Monstrous Nightmare â€" in over two years. And then there was Stumpy, a Gronckle who had lost a leg to Vikings, who had lived with him for three years, adjusting to his lost limb, before finally flying off.

Hiccup had met so many dragons over the years that they all began to blur together. Some â€“ like the Bullrougher who attacked him last week â€“ wanted nothing to do with him. Others â€“ like the Hideous Zippleback he had freed during a raid two months ago â€“ merely spoke with him and then moved on. Still others â€“ like Stumpy â€“ stayed with him for a while before leaving. And finally there were the dragons who lived nearby â€“ like Midnight â€“ who visited Hiccup's Cove every once in a while.

The three dragons with him now were shaping up to be some of the last two kinds. And hopefully, in just a few short days, they would be joined by two more dragons. He smiled, thinking of the Zippleback and the Nightmare flying free, and headed down into the cove, greeting the three dragons and looking for his own.

\* \* \*

><p>The next few days passed quickly as Hiccup made sure to keep himself busy.</p>

He spent his mornings stuck training against the Zippleback in the ring â€“ Gobber was saving the Nightmare for the winner â€“ and Hiccup made sure to stay out of the way. Thankfully, remembering the eel from last time, the Zippleback also stayed away from him. Only once did Hiccup have to dodge the two-headed dragon's attack, and only Astrid saw his usual clumsiness slip away. She alone remained suspicious of his abilities â€“ despite his best efforts otherwise, Hiccup was second in dragon training. Yet again luck was on his side however, as Astrid focused on winning the competition instead of trying to figure out how he had suddenly gotten so good (at least from her point of view).

His nights were spent eating dinner with the teens, trying to evade their questions and the newfound attention of the town. He made sure to stay in town each night, heading straight to his room or the forge after dinner, quick to want to separate himself from the Vikings. The Terror had taken to spending nights in his room, the small dragon easily able to slip in and out of the village, and Hiccup was thankful for the company â€“ he only wished that Toothless could be there too.

His afternoons were spent with the dragons. He treated any small wounds they had accumulated in the arena, carefully looking them over. He took them to the cliff where he had found a field of dragon nip, the five of them â€“ four dragons and one human â€“ spending their time rolling in the grass and diving in the ocean. He introduced the Terror to the families he had met on Terror Island, allowing him to spend time with the other small dragons. He led the Nadder to Midnight's Cave, introducing her to fellow Nadders. He showed the Gronckle the small quarry he had been shown by other Gronckles, allowing her to eat the best rocks she had had in quite some time.

Together the group of five got to know each other in just a few short days. The dragons were routinely surprised, but quickly accepted, how close Hiccup and Toothless were. They seemed to enjoy spending time with Hiccup as much as he enjoyed spending time with them. Hiccup taught the dragons which spots on the island to avoid, where other dragons lived, and the best fishing spots. Twice he had to avoid

Astrid in the woods, furiously practicing her skills with the axe.

Eventually his short reprieve had to end however and dawn the next day a lone, battered ship returned, overflowing with the remaining Vikings. Hiccup watched from afar as Gobber greeted Stoick, the two battle-brothers quickly catching up with each other. There would be no dragon training that day but tomorrowâ€”Tomorrow he had to go against Astrid for the chance to kill the Monstrous Nightmare â€” which meant tomorrow night he would be getting the dragons out of there. After that there was no going back. The Vikings would know immediately that someone had helped the dragons to escape, he could only hope that his reputation kept them from suspecting him.

He turned away from watching the Vikings disembark, heading into the woods. If something did go wrong, if he did get caught, well, he wanted to spend today with Toothless.

\* \* \*

><p>That night Hiccup went to the forge after dinner, absentmindedly sketching and improving on his designs as he worried about what was to come. He was more nervous than he had been in a long time, his mind far away as he thought of all that could go wrong, and didn't notice when Stoick appeared in the doorway.</p>

When his father cleared his throat Hiccup jumped, hastily covering up his designs â€” he couldn't remember if there were any dragon related inventions he was working on. "Dad! You're back!" he exclaimed, acting as though he hadn't seen the ships in the harbor. No need to tell his father he had woken early to send the Terror back to Cove before dragon training. Though why his dad was visiting him he didn't know. "Gobber's not here," he continued.

"I know. I came looking for you," Stoick responded.

Hiccup was startled, mind racing with the possibilities. Did his dad know about the dragons? 'No, he'd be angrier if he did,' he told himself. 'Maybe he's just angry I let the Nadder escape?' He hesitated and his dad spoke again.

"Gobber tells me you've been doing well in dragon training." The large Viking smiled, beaming down at Hiccup, and he felt relief wash over him. It was just dragon training â€” his dad didn't know his secret.

He laughed nervously, shuffling his feet. "Yeah, well um, I did let that Nadder escape," he voiced awkwardly, cringing and waiting for his father to yell at him.

Stoick only laughed, waving a hand dismissively. "Everyone makes mistakes, yours just happen to be larger than others," he said easily. "Besides, I heard you took out the Gronckle and the Zippleback."

Hiccup blinked at his father in astonishment, ignoring the slight insult. 'Everyone makes mistakes? Where was that attitude before? Since when did Dad not get upset when I messed up,' Hiccup thought. 'When you took down a dragon,' he responded to his own question with disgust. His dad wasn't proud of him, not really, just proud of the

killer he thought his son was becoming. He shrugged uneasily up at his father, not willing to encourage the man, and Stoick continued.

"And believe me, it only gets better! Just wait till you spill a Nadder's guts for the first time. And mount your first Gronckle head on a spear. What a feeling!" Stoick laughed again, smacking Hiccup on the shoulder and sending him into the wall. "You really had me going there, son. All those years of the worst Viking Berk has ever seen! Odin, it was rough. I almost gave up on you! And all the while, you were holding out on me!"

Hiccup understood â€“ taking out two different dragons was more than his father had ever expected of him. 'He was probably just hoping I wouldn't get eaten.' He shook his head. "It was just luck Dad, I â€œI don't know how I did it."

"But you did!" Stoick responded. "And even if it takes another year we'll make a dragon killer of you yet!" Stoick reached behind him, presenting a horned helmet. "I brought you something, to keep you safe in the ring."

Hiccup grabbed the helmet, awed. "Wow, thanks," he said sincerely. It was rare that he received something from his father, and even rarer that that something wasn't a weapon. Part of him was filled with joy, here was proof that his father cared about him and accepted him, but the rational part of his mind argued back. 'He wouldn't be so proud if he knew about the dragons.'

"Your mother would've wanted you to have it. It's half of her breast plate." Stoick smiled, tapping his own helmet. "Matching set. Keeps her close, y'know?" Hiccup eyed the mismatched helmets, grimacing. "Wear it proudly. You deserve it. You've held up your end of the deal."

Hiccup squirmed, forcing a yawn â€“ no he really hadn't. "Thanks. I should â€œI should really get to bed," he returned, more guilty than before.

After an awkward good night Stoick left, leaving Hiccup alone with his thoughts. The teen collapsed on the stool, putting his head in his hands on the desk. "What am I doing?"

\* \* \*

><p>The next day Hiccup found himself in the ring with Astrid and the Zippleback, watched by what seemed to be the entire village. As Hiccup hunkered down behind a barrier he was joined by Astrid, the young Viking shoving her axe at his throat. "Stay out of my way! I'm winning this thing," she warned him.</p>

Hiccup shook his head as she darted off. "Go ahead," he murmured, ducking low and summersaulting to another barrier. He glanced up, ignoring the cheers for Astrid, and quickly spotted Stoick among the onlookers. His father was watching him keenly, pride written all over his face, and Hiccup forced a half-hearted smile, still incredibly guilty that he was deceiving his father. He adjusted his helmet, slinking along to another barrier and acting as if he was approaching the dragon.

A few feet away Astrid had managed to whack one of the two heads and Hiccup was forced to jump out of the way as the other head swung around. He heard the crowd react to his close shave with the dragon but ignored it, watching instead as Astrid took out the second head, knocking out the dragon once and for all.

Hiccup stood up, shifting nervously as Gothi, the village elder, stepped forward, tapping her staff. He knew it would be noticed if he tried to leave but he didn't particularly want to stick around either. He managed to contain his nerves, moving toward Astrid and Gobber, who had just entered the ring.

Above them, Stoick held out his hands to silence the jabbering crowd. "Okay quiet down. The elder has decided."

Behind Hiccup, Gobber pointed toward Astrid, eagerly awaiting the elder's response. Gothi nodded and the crowd erupted into cheers. "Congratulations Astrid," Gobber crowed, "you get to kill the dragon!"

Astrid grinned proudly and Hiccup slunk off into the crowd that swarmed her, instantly forgotten. His dad would be caught up in his role as chief, hosting a celebration for the new great Viking warrior, and Hiccup wanted nothing to do with it. He headed away from the arena, looking back at the last minute and feeling a familiar pang in his heart as he realized â€“ not for the first time â€“ that he would never be part of them.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: So, it's been awhile... Sorry about that. I'm back now but I can't guarantee anything for the next chapter. A huge shout out to everyone who reviewed, followed, or favorited this story - you were my inspiration to keep going, so give yourselves a hug from me. <strong>

\*\*I hope you like it.\*\*

## 5. Fishlegs

Hiccup paced around the Cove restlessly, unable to stop thinking about all the things that could go wrong. Everything was riding on tonight â€“ there wouldn't be a second opportunity to try again. If he messed up then a dragon would die. And it would be his fault. Next to his pacing form Toothless was laying on the ground, following the teens every move with his eyes.

'\_Enough,\_' the dragon finally growled. '\_You'll get nowhere if you keep worrying about it. Where's your bow and arrows?\_'

Hiccup stopped in his tracks, startled. '\_What?'\_ he asked, turning to face the Night Fury.

'\_You're not going anywhere until night falls,\_' Toothless reminded him. '\_So you need a distraction. Where's your bow and arrows?\_'

Hiccup gestured behind him. '\_In the house,\_' he said, '\_but I can hit a target from 200m already.\_'

'\_And the last time you held a bow was a week ago. Besides,'\_ Toothless let loose the dragon equivalent of a mischievous grin, '\_have you ever hit a target while moving?\_'

'\_I've hit a moving target before,\_' Hiccup immediately protested, '\_how do think I hunt?'\_

'\_I meant while \_you\_ were moving.\_'

The rider raised an eyebrow. '\_You mean â€" flying?\_' Toothless nodded, a habit he had picked up from Hiccup, and the teen grinned. '\_That could be fun.\_'

Together they took to the sky, a quiver of arrows strapped onto Hiccup's back and a bow in his hands. He fiddled with it quickly, holding on with only his legs as Toothless flew low to the ground. '\_We're going to need to set up a target!\_' Hiccup yelled to his friend over the wind whistling in his ears.

Toothless just snorted. '\_Why not catch me a rabbit?\_' he called back. '\_Carrying you always makes me rather hungry!\_'

Hiccup laughed easily, his troubles slipping away. '\_Don't blame me if you go hungry tonight!\_' he returned, pulling an arrow from his quiver and scanning the undergrowth for life.

As the dragon's shadow swept over the meadow they were flying above a rabbit burst from the tall grass, frantically trying to flee. Hiccup nocked his arrow and fired, missing the rabbit by a good two feet. Undaunted he quickly reloaded, this time adjusting for the fact he was circling in midair. It was a much closer miss. Toothless let down in the meadow as the rabbit hopped out of sight and Hiccup dismounted to retrieve his arrows. '\_We're setting up a target,\_' he told the dragon. '\_It's hard enough that I'm moving but add in the fact that the target's moving and you might as well make it impossible.\_'

Toothless conceded with a laugh, grateful that Hiccup had been sufficiently distracted.

\* \* \*

><p>That night Hiccup waited until his father's snores echoed through the house before sitting up. With a practiced ease he headed over to his window, hoisting himself outside. Despite the fact that it was the middle of the night Hiccup easily navigated the footholds that he had created over the years, shimming down the wall in no time. Quietly and quickly he made his way through the village, traveling the path to the arena without a sound. Soon he reached the natural bridge that connected the dragons' prison with the rest of the Berk.<p>

Toothless was already there waiting for him, the Night Fury easily blending into his surroundings, and Hiccup quickly apologized. '\_My dad took forever to fall asleep\_,'\_ he explained.

The dragon just snorted lightly, not wanting to discuss Hiccup's father, and the two of them headed into the arena. Not bothering with pretenses Hiccup simply opened the cages, allowing first the

Zippleback and then the Nightmare to burst free.

They did so quickly, both of them ready to attack, stopping only when they realized they had been released by an unarmed teenager and his Night Fury. Hiccup explained what he was doing, and how he refused to let them die on his watch.

The Nightmare eyed him curiously. '\_You are unusual, Rider, but I accept your help,\_' he responded proudly.

'\_C'mon then.\_' Hiccup led the three dragons out of the arena, sliding easily onto Toothless' back. Together the three dragons took off in a V formation, dragon and rider leading the way to the Cove.

Behind them the arena gate remained open, the doors to the two dragons' cages splayed open for all to see.

Hiccup didn't look back.

\* \* \*

><p>For the rest of the night Hiccup fidgeted restlessly in his bed, unable to sleep. He had successfully rescued the dragons, sneaking in and out of the village easily, and they were currently sleeping in the Cove. Except for Toothless. He gave up sleep as a lost cause and walked over to his window, watching the rising sun, and knew his best friend was doing the same. No doubt Toothless would be on high alert all day, anxiously waiting for news or Hiccup's screams for help.</p>

But even if it did go wrong Hiccup had vowed to keep his mouth shut. He was more than aware of his dragon's superior hearing. It would not be him who exposed the illustrious Night Fury to the blood-thirsty Vikings. It would not be him who got Toothless killed.

Scenarios ran through his head â€“ his father disowning him, being exiled from the village, a mob of Vikings wanting revenge â€“ but not once did he allow Toothless to come into the picture. Toothless was safe â€“ far away from Berk.

As he heard his father wake Hiccup swallowed his fear, squaring his shoulders and heading down for breakfast. 'I've been pretending all my life,' he told himself. 'Today should be no different.'

Breakfast commenced in an awkward silence â€“ as it usually did in the Chief's household â€“ and Hiccup was glad his father had to leave early to prepare for the ceremony. The whole village would be present for the killing and a grand affair was usually had by all. Hiccup had never attended, but then, he had never really been noticed before either. This time he had to be there.

He finished breakfast slowly, savoring these last moments of peace before leaving his house atop the hill. Trekking down the hill into the village Hiccup looked for the other teens, spotting them easily on their way to the ring. Astrid was among them, determination in her eyes as she smiled at the praise they heaped upon her. Hiccup joined them without their notice, trailing behind as they crossed the bridge with the other villagers. As they neared the arena however the procession slowed to a halt and Hiccup could hear shouts of dismay

from up ahead.

"The dragons are gone!" echoed down the line, people craning their necks to see. Hiccup didn't bother - he knew the sight that greeted those in front, the open gate, the empty cages. Instead he waited anxiously, his mind wandering as the crowd grew restless. Astrid's determination had given way to fury and the other teens were more than indignant on her behalf, particularly Snotlout.

Eventually there was a loud clang from ahead and Chief Stoick's voice roared out over the tumult. "Enough!" he cried out. The crowd quieted. "Return to the village," their chief ordered them, "we will convene in the Great Hall."

Slowly the Vikings turned around, shuffling back along the narrow bridge as they headed back to Berk. Hiccup plodded obediently behind his peers, dreading what his father would decide. Was his reputation as Hiccup the Useless enough that no one would ever suspect him? He glanced at the sky, as if looking for answers, but the empty blue expanse was all that greeted him. He just wanted someone to talk to; someone to share his worries, to reassure him that it would be alright. It struck him that the names of possibilities running through his head were not people he would find in Berk. In fact, they were not people at all.

Every single being that Hiccup contemplated turning to for help was a dragon. Just what did that say about him? He pictured Toothless' protectiveness, Midnight's mothering, Forge's mischievous distractions, Fireworm's wisdom, and Ripwing's hero worship but not once did he picture a Viking he could turn to. He pictured his Cove in the woods, a place where dragons came and went freely but no Viking had ever entered. He pictured his lean-to and how it was littered with all of his most treasured possessions while his room in Berk remained sparse and bare.

'I'm more dragon than Viking,' he thought. 'I turn to them for help, I've learned how to use all my senses, I see better in the dark, I walk silently without thinking - I even have my own territory! But ... is it a bad thing to be like them? I never was much of a Viking anyway.' Hiccup was confused. He had always seen himself as an outcast, never pictured himself as a Viking, but that didn't mean he wasn't a member of this village. 'Would I really be upset if I was exiled for this?' he asked himself. But Hiccup didn't know the answer.

He shuffled into the back of the hall quietly, staying in the shadows and out of sight, dragging himself to the present. Now wasn't the time to wonder if he would miss Berk (he knew Berk wouldn't miss him), now was the time to listen. He waited anxiously but the hall was surprisingly silent. Word had gotten around that the dragons had been freed with outside help. It seemed he had miscalculated. Vikings weren't throwing blame around because none of them wanted to suggest that another Viking would do this. Siding with dragons went against every fiber of a Vikings being and to blame a fellow villager would be tantamount to saying that they weren't a Viking.

But blame was going to be placed and soon there were murmured suggestions running through the crowd. Two words, in particular, stood out: Alvin and Outcasts. Hiccup supposed it made sense. The Vikings would sleep better if they knew there wasn't a traitor in

their midst. Attacking the Outcasts they could handle â€“ living with a traitor would be decidedly more difficult.

Hiccup's father quickly agreed with the assessment, shouting once more to quiet down the hall. "If the Outcasts are responsible we will make them pay!" he vowed. "And if they're still on Berk we will find them!"

Cheers followed Stoick's announcement and the chief began dividing the villagers into groups. "We'll search the beaches!" he told them. Naturally Stoick himself would lead one group, as well as Gobber, Spitelout, and so on. The teens, Hiccup's training group as well as the groups that had passed only a year or two ago, were to guard the docks, in case the Outcasts attacked while the majority of the Vikings were absent.

Hiccup couldn't see any way out of it, so he followed the other teens down to the docks. If there really had been Outcasts he probably would have snuck away, scouting the beaches with Toothless, but he knew there weren't. Now he was stuck with a group of people who lived to make him miserable. 'It's better than the alternative,' he told himself as they reached the docks.

Snotlout had already inserted himself with the older teens and, upon walking out onto the docks, promptly pushed Hiccup into the frigid water. He swallowed a mouthful, not expecting the dunking, and came up, sputtering and coughing, to the sound of laughter. Dogsbreath in particular seemed to find it amusing, using his foot to push Hiccup back under. Hiccup flailed, swallowing more water before surfacing again. He latched onto the dock, staring down at it and coughing wildly as he avoided the gazes of the other teens.

"He looks like a downed rat!" Tuffnut pointed out, sending the group into more laughter.

Hiccup knew better than to pull himself up and so clung to the dock, shivering and coughing until the group moved on, heading for the end of the pier. When all had left but Fishlegs and Astrid he pulled himself up, collapsing on the dock and coughing up more water as he sat there. He glanced up curiously at the two who remained, studying Astrid's disgusted stare and Fishlegs' look of pity.

"Why do you have to make it so easy for them?" Astrid demanded to know.

'Because I'm hoping that if I ignore them they'll go away,' he thought. 'Because I don't want to fight them.' He didn't voice either of these thoughts though â€“ he knew that it wasn't what Astrid wanted to hear. Astrid was tough, the perfect example of a Viking. She believed in defending your tribe and yourself. She believed that everyone had to work together for the good of the tribe. Hiccup did not embody those values, he wasn't a Viking and Astrid had never seen him defend anything. Out of all the Vikings, Hiccup understood Astrid's motives the most.

When he didn't answer Astrid gave him another look of disgust and walked away, joining the other teens at the end of the dock. Hiccup turned to look at Fishlegs, who remained silent. The larger boy lowered himself onto the dock, sitting next to him.

Hiccup pulled himself up, sitting up straight and removing his water-laden vest. He handed it silently to Fishlegs, who took it and began to wring it out over the ocean. He then removed his boots, dumping the water out of them and placing them on the dock next to his wrung out shirt. After a moment of staring companionably out over the open water Hiccup spoke. "I wouldn't blame you if you sat by them," he told Fishlegs, still shivering slightly.

The larger Viking wasn't exactly accepted by his peers â€“ due largely to the fact he enjoyed reading and learning about dragons â€“ but they didn't ridicule him either. This was mainly because of his large stature and his tendency to go berserk if anyone tried to fight him. Fishlegs didn't dignify his comment with a response.

After another moment though, he spoke up. "How did you do so well in dragon training?" he asked.

"I â€œ!" Hiccup hesitated, holding back the lie he had prepared for this moment. Fishlegs was the closest thing he had to a friend â€“ a human friend at least. He didn't want to lie to him. "When I was younger I ran into a Nadder during a raid. It was raiding the food shed and I thought I could take care of it," he began, deciding to tell Fishlegs a true story. It had happened one year after he had met Toothless, when he only understood a portion of Dragonese and before he knew the truth about the raids. "I tripped, naturally, but I got incredibly lucky. I tripped over a basket of fish which promptly spilled on the floor. To my surprise the Nadder hissed, backing out of the shed and flying away." He turned to Fishlegs, meeting the Vikings curious gaze. "Turns out dragons really hate eel. That's how I got the Zippleback into the cage." Hiccup left out the fact that he had asked Toothless about it later â€“ and that he had tried to speak to the Nadder in the first place.

Fishlegs stared at him. "Hiccup that's incredible! You discovered something that even Bork the Bold didn't know!" he crowed, citing the author of How to Train Your Dragon. Hiccup ducked down, unused to such praise, even from Fishlegs. "Why didn't you tell anyone?" the Viking asked.

Hiccup shrugged. "It took me a while to realize it was the eel, not the fish," he reasoned. "Besides, they would have seen it as cheating. You're supposed to fight the dragon," he said scornfully. "Not frighten him." He gestured toward the teens as he spoke and Fishlegs nodded reluctantly.

"Yeah," he answered gloomily. "I never was very good at that."

Hiccup glanced back up at Fishlegs, thought hard, and decided to take the chance. "Did you ever think there was more to dragons then most people believe?" he asked.

If he had asked another other Viking they would have been shocked before shrugging off the question and spouting some comment about mindless killers. But not Fishlegs. The teen nodded eagerly, glad to share his knowledge. "I've seen them," he spoke quickly and excitedly. "Sometimes it looks like they're talking to each other. And I've seen dragons protecting other dragons during the raid! Like they care about each other! It's fascinating!"

Hiccup turned to look at the other teens, listening in on their conversation about what they would do if they spotted the Outcasts, before turning and gazing into Fishlegs' eager expression. 'Can I trust him?' he wondered. 'If there was any Viking I could trust it would be Fishlegs.' He turned away from Fishlegs debating with himself, and gazed out over the ocean. The sea was calm and the sun was nice and warm on his wet form. He could feel Fishlegs deflating beside him at the lack of reaction and he couldn't stand to disappoint his old friend. "They can talk," he said slowly, still not looking at Fishlegs. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Fishlegs perk up beside him.

"What?" the Viking asked, staring at Hiccup incredulously.

"They can talk," Hiccup repeated, finally turning to look at Fishlegs. "I've â€œ I've been studying them. They have their own language."

Fishlegs continued to stare, gazing at Hiccup with a mixture of shock, admiration, and respect. There was no trace of hatred or disgust in his face and Hiccup felt a wave of relief. Fishlegs wasn't going to accuse him of not being a Viking. He should have known â€œ the larger boy loved learning above all else, a unique trait in Berk.

"All of them?" Fishlegs finally asked. "Like, even between the Gronckles and the Nadders and the Nightmares?"

Hiccup nodded. "All species speak the same language, even the Terrors and the Timberjacks," he said, mentioning one of the smallest and largest dragons.

Fishlegs' eyes widened. "You've seen a Timberjack? Those are really rare!"

Hiccup smiled, nodding slightly, and couldn't help but boast. "I've seen three," he told Fishlegs.

The teen looked at him with something akin to hero worship â€œ Hiccup would know. He had only rescued two Timberjacks from the Green Death's thrall but those two Timberjacks had mated. Their son, Ripwing, was a good friend of Hiccup who practically worshiped him for freeing his mother and father. It had taken Hiccup a while to get used to the constant praise Ripwing heaped on him.

Feeling slightly ashamed of his boasting Hiccup shrugged. "I've spent a lot of time in the woods," he admitted modestly. "I was bound to see dragons eventually." Not to mention he spent half his time in the company of one.

The Viking beside him shifted uncomfortably at the subtle hint that Hiccup didn't enjoy his time in Berk.

"Would you believe me if I said not all dragons were bad?" Hiccup asked suddenly, before he could think twice about it and doubt himself.

Fishlegs opened his mouth, undoubtedly prepared to say no, before closing it again and appearing to think about Hiccup's words. "I suppose â€œ I would," he finally said, seemingly surprised at his own

words.

"Can I trust you to keep a secret?" Hiccup asked, gazing intently out over the ocean again.

"Why?" Fishlegs asked cautiously, uncertain as to where the conversation was heading.

"Because in this village we have a kill on sight policy when it comes to dragons," Hiccup responded bitterly.

"Alright," the Viking responded simply.

"Alright what?"

"I can keep a secret. But what does it have to do with killing dragons?"

"One day," Hiccup began, "quite some time ago, I found a dragon. And I didn't kill him."

"I haven't killed any dragons either," Fishlegs admitted.

"But I could have. He was wounded. Injured. Couldn't fly. But I looked at him, helpless and starving, and I didn't kill him."

There was a moment of silence. "What did you do?"

Hiccup looked over at Fishlegs, debating whether or not he should tell him. He glanced back at the teens, making sure they were still caught up in their discussion, and then turned to the ocean once more. "I helped him."

Fishlegs didn't respond.

"Would you like to meet him?"

"Me meet him?" Fishlegs stammered, taken by surprise.

Hiccup stared at him, waiting for a response. Finally, Fishlegs nodded.

There was a moment of silence as they both contemplated the teen's response. Hiccup didn't know if he had been expecting Fishlegs to agree or not, all he could think was that this definitely hadn't been how the day would turn out.

"Thanks," he eventually said.

Fishlegs nodded again but neither was sure where to go from there. The Viking was staring at Hiccup as though he had never seen him before, and was only just being introduced to him.

After a long stretch of silence both Hiccup and Fishlegs jumped at the loud shouts of the other Vikings on the dock. They were so caught up in their own conversation that they had forgotten they weren't alone. Hiccup turned to face the group, noticing at once that they were staring behind him, back at Berk. He twisted from his position on the dock, glancing up to find the Vikings had returned, Spitelout signaling to the teens that they were done watching the docks.

The teens eagerly left their position — having grown tired with the lack of action — tramping over Hiccup's vest before he could pull it out of the way. Hiccup merely sighed tiredly once they had passed, pulling on the vest as he stood and slipping his feet into his still wet boots. Fishlegs also stood, the two of them forming the rear of the procession.

"When?" he asked quietly, mindful of the Vikings in front of them.

Hiccup turned to look at Fishlegs as they walked. "Now?" he offered hesitantly.

Fishlegs glanced at the roughhousing teens in front of him, steeled his resolve, and nodded. "Won't they notice if we leave?"

Hiccup shrugged. "They never notice when I leave," he said simply. Fishlegs sent him a look but followed obediently when Hiccup beckoned, separating from the rest of the Vikings. Hiccup led Fishlegs through the woods, taking the shortest route to the Cove. As he neared the cove he hesitated, turning to face Fishlegs. How could he have forgotten that the dragons from the arena were in there? Fishlegs would be sure to recognize them.

"I — there might have been something I forgot to mention," he offered hesitantly, turning to face the larger — and out of breath — teen.

Fishlegs struggled to catch his breath. "We're not there yet?" he asked, apparently not having heard Hiccup.

'Oops,' Hiccup thought to himself. 'Guess I'm quicker than I thought — then again, I do know this forest pretty well.' "No, we're here," he countered, "there's just, something I forgot to tell you."

Fishlegs looked nervous. "He's not going to attack me is he?"

Hiccup was quick to nod. "No! No, of course not. But, there's more than one dragon."

The Viking started. "What?! What do you mean more than one? How many?" he questioned nervously.

Mentally counting, Hiccup was quick to speak up, hoping that Fishlegs wouldn't back out. "Only six."

"Six!" Fishlegs' eyes widened. "You have six dragons?"

"They're not mine," Hiccup emphasized, hesitating once more, "— I rescued five of them." He watched Fishlegs closely, sure that the other teen was smart enough to figure out what he was saying.

"Rescued them from —" Fishlegs trailed off, staring at Hiccup in disbelief. "Hiccup, you didn't." He breathed out, eyes wide.

Hiccup just nodded.

"But that's what did you do?" Fishlegs asked, unable to put his thoughts into words, not wanting to insult the only person who had never insulted him.

"Believe me," Hiccup spoke quickly, "I had a reason, I can explain everything. It's not their fault that they raid us. There's this monster at the nest it controls all the dragons. If they don't feed it they die. Have you ever wondered why they steal the food instead of just eating it?"

"They're under control?" Fishlegs repeated, some of the fear that Hiccup was a traitor draining from his expression.

Hiccup nodded strongly. "If they don't feed it they'll die."

Fishlegs took a deep breath. "Alright. You're friends with dragons. Dragons are friendly. They speak their own language. They raid us because of some creepy mind control by some monster at their nest. Anything I miss?"

Hiccup shook his head. "It's alright if you don't want to do this."

Fishlegs stared at him, resolve seeming to creep over the large Viking. "That's the second stupid thing you've said to me today." Hiccup remembered when he had told Fishlegs that he wouldn't mind if the Viking joined his peers. "Where are the dragons."

Hiccup grinned. It seemed that, since he had agreed to meet the dragons, Fishlegs wasn't going to back out. "Through here," he gestured, leading Fishlegs into the Cove. He smiled proudly to himself. Finally, he was making some progress. A Viking of Berk was about to come face to face with dragons and not try to kill them. He couldn't wait to see Fishlegs' face when he met Toothless.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: So, a long wait, but not as long as last time. Hopefully I'll get better.</strong>

\*\*I must admit, this was not where I had intended to take things - Astrid was supposed to be the first to see the dragons. But then Snotlout had to push Hiccup in the water and Fishlegs wouldn't leave Hiccup by himself.\*\*

\*\*Anyway, I'm blown away by how much people seem to like this story. Over 100 follows! (and with only four chapters too!) Not to mention all of you wonderful reviewers. Thank you so much for your support.\*\*

\*\*Let me know how you thought it turned out!\*\*

## 6. Starting to Plan

Toothless wasn't in the Cove though in fact, only four dragons were, and only half of them were among the dragons Hiccup had warned Fishlegs about. He stepped forward on the ledge, gazing around the Cove before looking back to see the Viking's reaction. Midnight and

Ripwing's mother, Sharpfang, were curled up next to each other against one wall, sleeping. The Gronckle from the arena was only a few feet away, snoring quite loudly. And the Terror was sunning on a rock, perking up as soon as Hiccup entered.

"Welcome to our Cove," Hiccup said, smiling at Fishlegs' gob smacked expression.

"That's a ¢ that's a Timberjack!" the teen exclaimed.

Hiccup's grin widened as he nodded. "Yup, it seems that actually most of the dragons aren't here right now." He surveyed the Cove again, noticing that Midnight and Sharpfang were waking up. Fishlegs couldn't stop staring. "They're probably out fishing," Hiccup added helpfully as the Terror landed on his shoulder.

The Viking turned his gaze to Hiccup, watching in astonishment as the tiny dragon warbled happily, curling its tail around Hiccup's neck.

"Oh, Fishlegs this is ¢ Strangler," he introduced them, finally naming the little dragon as he wrapped his tail around Hiccup's neck once more.

Strangler lifted his head slightly, crowing happily at his new name and sniffing as he stared at Fishlegs, before settling back down on Hiccup's shoulder, wide eyes watching Fishlegs' every move.

"Strangler?" Fishlegs asked warily.

Hiccup gestured to the tail wrapped around his neck. "Yup, this guy won't leave me alone. C'mon, let's head down." He led Fishlegs down into the Cove, the Viking unable to keep his eyes off the tiny dragon on Hiccup's shoulders.

Sharpfang and Midnight stared at the two of them. '\_This is a Viking!\_' the Timberjack mother hissed angrily.

'\_Hiccup, why have you brought one of them here?\_' Midnight asked kindly, staring at Fishlegs warily.

"Fishlegs, this is Sharpfang and Midnight, they're not from the arena, they're just visiting," Hiccup told his nervous friend before turning to the dragons. '\_Guys this is Fishlegs, he's not going to hurt you. He doesn't actually have any weapons on him.\_'

'\_If you trust him then so do I,\_' Midnight told him, '\_but is he not one of your tormentors?\_'

"You ¢ you speak their language?" Fishlegs asked as the two mothers stood.

Hiccup nodded slightly. '\_Yeah. Thanks Midnight, he actually usually left me alone ¢ I'll see you two later then?\_'

Sharpfang hissed. '\_You'll be seeing my son later ¢ hopefully his visit will get him to shut up, he has been rambling on and on about your plan for months now.\_'

'\_Sorry about that,\_' Hiccup grinned sheepishly as the two dragons took flight, more than used to Sharpfang's sharp tongue.

"What?" Fishlegs asked from behind him.

"Oh, sorry," Hiccup responded, switching back to Norse. "They were just getting some sleep; I've been told that having kids is exhausting."

"Hiccup â€“ you speak their language?"

"Dragonese, yeah.

"Whatâ€¦, how?"

"Believe me, it wasn't easy. I couldn't get some of the sounds right for ages."

Fishlegs wasn't quite sure how to respond to that. "What about him?" The Viking pointed to the sleeping Gronckle on the ground.

"\_She's\_ the Gronckle from the arena," Hiccup corrected gently.

"Oh." Fishlegs eyed them cautiously as Hiccup approached her.

He gave the Gronckle a quick scratch and she woke slowly, gazing up at him happily. When Fishlegs shifted the Gronckle woke fully, eyes widening as she took in the Viking. '\_He is from the cage,\_' she said worriedly.

Hiccup nodded. '\_Yeah, but he won't hurt you.\_'

Fishlegs shifted himself closer, noting Hiccup's hand that still rested on the Gronckle.

"C'mon," Hiccup gestured, stepping away and indicating that Fishlegs should put his own hand on the dragon.

The Viking took another step closer, holding out his hand. "How do you say hello?" he asked, hesitating a couple feet away.

'\_Hello\_,'\_ Hiccup growled, careful to speak slowly. "It's the most common greeting â€“ they have a different saying for close friends."

Fishlegs took another step forward, briefly closed his eyes before opening them again, and placed his hand lightly on the Gronckle's forehead. '\_Hello,\_' he growled in passable Dragonese.

The Gronckle's eyes widened slightly before it leaned into Fishlegs' touch. '\_Hello,\_' she replied.

Half relieved and half panicked, Fishlegs turned to Hiccup, as if asking what to do next.

"Give her a scratch," Hiccup suggested, "dragons love to be scratched." And, while Fishlegs was distracted with the Gronckle, he whistled loudly for Toothless.

\* \* \*

><p>Toothless didn't know that Hiccup had brought Fishlegs to the Cove, for he hadn't run into Midnight or Sharpfang, but dragons have spectacular eyesight, or at least, Night Furies do. Thus, Toothless could see the young Viking in the Cove with Hiccup, and recognized him from the drawings Hiccup had made of his peers. This was the one the Vikings called Fishlegs, and from what Toothless knew of him he didn't torment Hiccup nearly as often as his friends did. Hiccup had described the boy as timid, yet fierce if the situation called for it, and intelligent, often turning to books unlike his Viking comrades.</p>

As he considered all he knew about the boy, Toothless also considered the best way to approach the Cove, looping back around before Hiccup spotted him in order to plan his entrance. Though this particular Viking was kinder than his peers, Toothless didn't know the extent to which Hiccup downplayed his torment, having never witnessed it himself. He wanted to make an impression on this teen, to scare him, but perhaps not as much as he would if he ever met any other Vikings from Berk.

Having put his plan in action he made his way back to the Cove, silent as a shadow, and regretted that he didn't have the darkness of night to hide in.

\* \* \*

><p>Fishlegs was slowly getting comfortable with the Gronckle, scratching her under her chin, when a large shadow passed over the Cove. Hiccup watched as he glanced up, startled, as a second, third, and then fourth shadow followed the first. Four large dragons had flown over the Cove and were circling back around. Hiccup knew exactly who they were, but he couldn't fault Toothless for wanting to put on a show.</p>

Fishlegs' hand fell still, mouth gaping open as the dragons landed spectacularly in the Cove. Toothless, at the front and leading the other dragons, swooped down impressively, wings outstretched like a giant bat to land right in front of the stunned Viking, who then squeaked in terror as the Nightmare, Nadder, and Zippelback from the arena followed after Toothless, landing behind him. They formed a large V with the Night Fury at the front, each of them staring at Fishlegs without blinking, and Toothless growled impressively.

After a moment of inaction with only the low growl to break the silence, Fishlegs turned toward Hiccup, eyes wide with repressed terror, only to see his old friend holding back a smile as he surveyed the scene.

"Hiccup?" he managed to squeak out, for the first time realizing that his mouth was open in surprise and closing it.

Hiccup grinned at him. "Fishlegs, I'd like you to meet my best friend, Toothless. Toothless, this is Fishlegs â€" he wanted to meet some dragons."

The Viking turned back to the group of dragons, still terrified but trusting that Hiccup wouldn't feed him to them as a snack. "Um, \_hello?\_" he attempted to say, hoping that his command of the

dragon's language wasn't as poor as he thought it was.

Though he didn't know much about the expressions of dragons, Fishlegs could only later describe them as surprised by his garbled word. Toothless sat back on his haunches (and now that the danger had passed Fishlegs was extremely curious as to what type of dragon he was and wanted to know if his theory "Night Fury!" was correct, because how awesome would that be to be one of the first Vikings to ever see the legendary dragon! And how awesome was it that Hiccup had befriended him and had known him for some time?) and regarded him curiously.

When a soft growl sounded from behind the large teen, Hiccup watched as Fishlegs barely held back a flinch, having apparently forgotten that the Gronckle was still there. The Gronckle was merely greeting her friends " and from what Hiccup could see Fishlegs most certainly had recognized the rest of the dragons from the arena " and stepped forward as she spoke softly, nudging up against Fishlegs' hand.

Instinctively, Fishlegs raised his arm to accommodate her as she did so, allowing the friendly dragon to nestle up against him and scratching her behind the ears without thought. Now that the four large dragons were in front of him the Gronckle must have seemed downright friendly.

Hiccup watched the entire proceedings with interest, noting the way Fishlegs greeted the Gronckle and how he didn't react to the dragon's close presence. The Gronckle's words reassured the other dragons and, aside from Toothless, they all relaxed marginally, studying the Viking with open curiosity.

He knew that Toothless had merely been putting on a show, intending to merit out the true intentions of Fishlegs and ensure that he was tough enough to stick around and hang out with dragons, but he also knew that Toothless hadn't just been doing it to impress or scare Fishlegs. It had been a warning, Hiccup knew, a warning showing how many dragons stood behind Hiccup and how many would come after Fishlegs if he betrayed them.

And yet Hiccup also knew, or at least was very sure, that the sight of the dragons wouldn't have caused Fishlegs to consider spilling his secrets. Undoubtedly Fishlegs had been frightened, and perhaps he had even regretted his decision to accompany Hiccup in the first place, but Hiccup doubted he had thought about running back to Berk screaming about Hiccup the Dragon Friend and the army of dragons he had amassed in the Cove.

Thankfully, the Gronckle had explained everything that Hiccup had meant to, that yes, Fishlegs had been one of their tormentors in the arena, but also that he could be trusted, that he wasn't ruthless and blood thirsty and had merely been doing what his elders had commanded him to do.

The Nadder was the bravest, approaching Fishlegs first, and Hiccup gave an encouraging nod to the Viking even as he walked past the Nadder, making his way toward Toothless.

'\_Hey bud,\_' he growled quietly, scratching under his dragon's chin as he watched Fishlegs interact, first with the Nadder, then with the

Nightmare.

Toothless didn't take his eyes off the second human to ever enter the Cove. '\_Do you trust him?' he asked solemnly.

Knowing that Toothless was completely serious, Hiccup took a moment to consider the dragon's words, to think about what Fishlegs had done to him as they had grown up together, and to think about what Fishlegs had done \_for \_him. '\_Yes,' he replied just as solemnly. Yes, he did trust the Viking not to reveal their secrets, and, more importantly, he trusted him not to harm the dragons.

With Hiccup's words, Toothless finally relaxed, turning to regard his human. '\_Then I trust him,' Toothless said simply, nudging Hiccup's middle as he looked up at him.

Hiccup grinned slowly, hugging Toothless' head as he watched the Zippleback to move forward to get each of his heads scratched by Fishlegs, whose confidence was growing with each dragon that approached him and who still hadn't removed his hand from the Gronckle. '\_Thanks bud.\_'

\* \* \*

><p>Several hours later found Hiccup, Toothless, Fishlegs, Strangler, and the Gronckle sitting around a fire in the middle of the Cove, the remaining dragons sleeping around the lake. Hiccup was leaning against Toothless with Strangler snoring lightly, still on his shoulder, but Fishlegs wasn't quite that comfortable around dragons yet, sitting next to the Gronckle but not close enough to touch her.</p>

It had taken a while, but Fishlegs had grown used to the presence of the dragons and now no longer reacted to their sleeping forms behind him. In the beginning he had been unable to stop looking over his shoulder, wary that the dragons were behind him, easily able to sneak up on him as they so desired, but as the afternoon had passed Fishlegs had gradually come to accept that the dragons had no such intentions. His fear had given way to curiosity, flooding Hiccup with question after question, ranging from facts about Night Furies to the different types of dragons Hiccup had met to the smallest of details about each dragon that wasn't covered in the Dragon Manual.

Hiccup answered his questions as best he could, excited to have someone to engage in intellectual conversation with. Toothless was his best friend, and there was no doubt that Hiccup loved conversing with him, but dragons didn't have books or the concept of studying and recording data about other living things. They had stories and legends, passed down by word of mouth, and Hiccup shared some of the more basic ones â€“ the ones that didn't reveal secrets about dragons or their culture â€“ but they weren't nearly as scientific as Hiccup and Fishlegs longed to be.

Most of the questions were second nature to Hiccup, he barely had to think before commenting on the preferred meal of the Night Fury or the best habitat for a Terrible Terror or where a Deadly Nadder was likely to make his nest, but others were more complex, and Hiccup enjoyed the intense discussions that resulted from such questions.

Hiccup also worked with Fishlegs to help him develop his Dragonese, teaching him a few more words but, for the most part, mainly working on pronunciation of certain syllables that had no equivalent in the Norse that the Vikings spoke. Dragons stuck with growls and chirps and whistles, unable to produce human sounds, and while people could replicate the sounds of the flying creatures, it took some time to get accustomed to the different noises and slight variations that could mean entirely different things.

The dragon rider was so absorbed in the conversation, and the sensation of having someone he had known all his life to share his knowledge with, that he didn't even notice the darkening of the night sky.

Fishlegs did, however. "Uh, Hiccup?" He spoke up, glancing up at the sky as he did so.

Hiccup turned to the young Viking. "Yeah?" he responded curiously, certain that Fishlegs had already exhausted his store of questions.

"It's getting dark out," Fishlegs pointed out. "Shouldn't we get back to the village soon?"

Hiccup hadn't even considered that, having intended to sleep in the Cove for the night, but now that he thought about it Fishlegs couldn't remain there with him - and he might not be able to make it back to the village on his own. "Oh, yeah," he said, standing and stretching slightly. "Sorry about that, my mind wanders sometimes." He grinned sheepishly in Fishlegs' direction, still somewhat giddy from the joy that the day had brought him, and dislodged Strangler from his shoulder, placing him on Toothless' back.

The black dragon opened one eye to stare at Hiccup balefully but otherwise didn't protest the placement of the tiny dragon. Hiccup just let out a chuckle. '\_You'll get over it bud\_, ' he said easily, aware that Fishlegs was studying his every syllable.

Grabbing a torch from his lean-to, Hiccup lit it over the fire still blazing, not worrying about accidentally burning down the forest as he and Fishlegs left the Cove together â€“ the dragons would take care of it.

The walk back was taken mostly in silence, Fishlegs concentrating on not stumbling over a random tree root as the darkness grew and Hiccup far too used to walking the route alone. Each of them was musing over the way the day had turned out, neither of them having ever considered that such a crazy stream of events would have led to this, the two of them making their way back to Berk as the sun set, having spent the majority of the day in a hidden Cove with dragons together.

Hiccup couldn't stop grinning, bolstered by the friendship Fishlegs had shown toward each of the dragons and the friendship he had shown toward Hiccup himself â€“ for that had been what had started it all and what had prompted Hiccup to invite Fishlegs to the Cove in the first place. For the first time since before he had learned Dragonese, Hiccup had spent the day speaking more Norse than his second, and preferred, language â€“ because even when he stayed in the village for the majority of the day Hiccup didn't do much

talking, he had stopped bothering when he realized no one was listening.

When they reached the edge of the village, preparing to go their separate ways, they paused for a moment, staring at each other and wondering what to say.

"Thank you," each of them voiced at the same time after a moment's hesitation. They paused again, grinning, and then Hiccup spoke up again.

"No, seriously Fishlegs, thank you â€“ you had no reason to believe me, or to trust me, but you did."

"You had no reason to trust me either," Fishlegs retaliated. "You told me earlier that you met Toothless quite some time ago." He paused, staring at Hiccup contemplatively, and Hiccup returned his gaze, slightly uncertainly. Hiccup had known Toothless for half his life by now, but he hadn't expected Fishlegs to pick up on that, nor had he expected the larger Viking to seem so regretful. "I think by that you mean you've known him for years now. He's been a better friend to you than I ever was."

Hiccup didn't quite know what to say to that. Fishlegs was right. There was no if, ands, or buts about it. Toothless was Hiccup's best friend, a far better companion than Fishlegs had ever tried to be. But that wasn't to say that Fishlegs hadn't tried, and that wasn't to say that Fishlegs had been a terrible friend.

Fishlegs took Hiccup's silence for the confirmation it was. He nodded. "One day, maybe you'll tell me all your secrets," he said, "I have a feeling you have a lot more than a few dragons in a Cove." He turned to leave, face solemn, and Hiccup watched him go, still unsure of how to respond.

"Fishlegsâ€œ!" he started hesitantly, stuck by the teen's compassion and understanding and his sudden emotional conversation.

The larger Viking looked back at him expectantly.

"I ... I think that day will come a lot sooner than you think," he offered. It was the only thing he could think to say. He couldn't reassure Fishlegs that he had been a good friend, because in all honesty he hadn't been, but he could show Fishlegs that all was forgiven, and that whatever he had or hadn't done in the past, Hiccup trusted him to be his friend now, even if he wasn't quite ready to reveal what he had been hiding for years. He had taken a big step today, much like Fishlegs had, and they both knew it.

Fishlegs' face lost some of its seriousness at Hiccup's words and he allowed a small smile to take form, nodding gratefully before he turned once more and disappeared in the direction of his home.

\* \* \*

><p>The next morning Hiccup was glad that he had led Fishlegs back to the village and remained there, rather than having returned to the Cove, for Gobber woke the teens bright and early to go hunting that morning.</p>

"Dragon training might have been interrupted but there are still bellies to fill!" he bellowed gruffly. "It's time for you to contribute your fair share in this village, partner up and be back by midday with your catch."

The teens surged forward, grabbing from the assorted pile of weapons that Gobber had laid out for them and making their way to the woods. Snotlout was boasting loudly of his skills to anyone who would listen (the twins) as Astrid followed after them determinedly. Fishlegs and Hiccup had hung back, making their way to the pile last, and Hiccup helped Fishlegs pick out a weapon while taking nothing for himself.

This time, unlike their training activity in the arena, there was no question of whether or not they would partner up (not that they had a choice anyway, what with the other teens' shunning them). As they trooped into the woods together, quite a bit behind the others, Fishlegs glanced at Hiccup uncertainly.

"Uh, Hiccup, you didn't pick anything from the pile," he told him.

Hiccup just grinned slightly, moving aside his vest to reveal his small dagger. "I've got a bow in the Cove," he told Fishlegs. "I made it myself so it fits me â€“ a lot better than the leftovers Gobber has."

Fishlegs eyed his friend in surprise and Hiccup shrugged.

"Living with dragons isn't as easy as I've made it out to be â€“ it can be dangerous. Besides," Hiccup grinned again, trying to lighten the mood and not wanting to scare Fishlegs away, "sometimes I like to make my own dinner."

Fishlegs returned the grin, moving onto a more comfortable topic, not wanting to touch upon the fact that Hiccup ate by himself or that Hiccup could probably have died hanging out with said dragons and that nobody would have even noticed he was gone for some time. "So you can hunt then?" he asked nervously. "Because I'm not very good with a bow."

Hiccup laughed, grateful for the topic change as well. "C'mon," he said easily, "I'll show you a thing or two."

By the time they returned to the village many hours later Hiccup and Fishlegs had acquired almost as much fresh game as each of the other teams, surprising both their peers and Gobber. The only reason that they didn't have more was because Hiccup had decided to take it slow. He had spent more time working on improving Fishlegs' ability with the bow than on actual hunting, grateful for the excuse to hunt less. Especially seeing as he was not looking forward to explaining to Fishlegs that he liked to keep up appearances by doing exactly what was expected of him â€“ that was to say, failing miserably and generally being clumsy.

Their conversations had drifted away from the technical details about dragons they had had yesterday towards Hiccup's own experiences with said dragons, and Hiccup could tell that Fishlegs truly enjoyed hearing his stories.

Fishlegs only accompanied him to the Cove for a short time afterward, telling Hiccup that he had been missed the night before, and made his own way back to the village while Hiccup remained behind.

The dragon rider stayed in the Cove that night, aware that his father was too busy looking into the disappearance of the dragons to wonder if his son was in bed yet. Part of him felt guilty for causing the village such grief but glancing around at the free dragons in the Cove reminded him that it was all worth it. He woke early the next morning to return to the village in time to begin their next activity — fishing.

This time Hiccup and Fishlegs retrieved the most, but only because the other teams had headed to what was normally the best fishing spot along Berk — where Hiccup knew Toothless had stolen his breakfast from that morning, scaring away the remaining fish.

\* \* \*

><p>And so time passed, Hiccup and Fishlegs becoming closer as the days flew by, learning about dragons and how to speak Dragonese and teaming up for all the tasks that Gobber assigned to them.</p>

About a week after Fishlegs first entered the Cove Berk was subject to its first dragon raid since Hiccup's father and his men had left to search for the nest. Hiccup was in the village at the time of the attack but no longer would he sit by and watch as Vikings and Dragons ravaged each other for something that neither of them could control.

He raced toward the Cove as fast as he could, not bothering to hide his disappearance from the village because he believed that no one was watching. As he approached he whistled for Toothless all the while urging the other dragons to stay put. Toothless was ready before he even got there, having heard the many dragons flying toward Berk, and Hiccup took a running leap into the Cove from the cliffs surrounding it, landing on Toothless' back as they flew toward Berk.

For the majority of the fight, Hiccup remained on the outskirts of the battle, hunkered low over Toothless' back. Together they grappled with the enthralled dragons, breaking them out of their daze and preventing them from harming the villagers. Every now and again Toothless would shoot a bolt of his purple lightning into the village, breaking up a fight between dragon and Viking when it seemed as if one of the two would emerge victorious.

Together they heard the familiar cry of "Night Fury!" — even though it had been some time since Toothless had come near Berk during a raid the Vikings never forgot the most feared dragon and its deadly aim.

When all was said and done the majority of the dragons had fled, most of them returning to the Red Death, bringing what they had stolen, but a precious few of them escaping into lands unknown, free from her grasp.

Three dragons remained, gathering around Toothless, and Hiccup led them to a clearing not far from Berk — though far enough that it was unlikely that any Vikings would see their take-off and

landing.

One Gronckle in the group regarded him curiously before thanking him and taking off once more. The second Gronckle was a bit more polite but also wished to leave and Hiccup sent him to an island he knew of that many other free Gronckles nested on, far enough from the thrall of their captor. The third dragon was a Nadder whose wing had been injured by a stray Viking axe, thrown at her from afar, and Hiccup offered her the use of the Cove to give her time to heal, which she graciously accepted.

Thus, exhausted but exhilarated from a job well done, Hiccup and Toothless separated, Toothless leading the injured dragon to the Cove, for it would be unwise for her to fly again, while Hiccup made his way silently toward Berk, sneaking in past the clean-up crews and chipping in his own fair share of work as he contemplated what was to be done about the dragon raids. He had spent much time in the past thinking of ways to break the Queen's hold on the dragons of Berk and he still had several ideas that he had yet to put in action, but he wasn't certain that any of them would work. The Queen was encased in her mountain, guarded against attack, and Hiccup had yet to think of anything that could bring her from her nest.

He had to do something, and soon, he just didn't have a clue of what that something might be.

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><p><strong>AN: Well, I'm a terrible person. What has it been - six months? I'm so sorry, I promise you this story will not be abandoned. I'm starting to get a routine down that definitely includes time for writing so I mean it this time when I say the next chapter should be out much sooner, I've already begun to work on it. <strong>

\*\*Thanks for all the wonderful reviews and the many favorites and follows, your words are my inspiration to continue and it humbles me that so many people enjoy the stories that I write. \*\*

\*\*Let me know what you thought about the inclusion of Fishlegs - most of you seemed to like the idea of it last chapter.\*\*

## 7. Interlude: Astrid

When Berk was attacked by dragons for the first time following her training, Astrid was eager to jump into battle. She had been unable to prove her worth as a Viking earlier, due to the dragons missing from the arena, but now, in a real battle, she could show the village what she was capable of.

No longer did she have to be on fire patrol â€“ as admirable of a job as it was, helping the village, Astrid wanted to help in other ways, to be a warrior and fight for her people. She grabbed her favorite axe, charging toward the nearest dragon and chasing it away from the fish it was trying to grab.

Chaos surrounded her, the first of the dragons landing on Berk as the Vikings charged forth, always ready for battle. Astrid saw her fellow teens pick up their weapons for their first ever raid as warriors and frowned as Hiccup ran past her, no weapon in sight other than the

small dagger that was always at his belt. The small fool was going to get himself killed and Astrid almost followed after him to protect him. A dragon distracted her though and she jumped back into battle, the village runt temporarily forgotten.

Surprisingly, the legendary Night Fury made an appearance that night â€“ not that anyone actually saw it â€“ and once Astrid even had to dodge its purple lightening, right when she was about to behead a Nadder. Other than the appearance of the most dangerous dragon in Berk the raid went surprisingly well. No Viking lost life or limb that night, though one had been badly burned, and surprisingly less food was taken than normal. Though she hadn't managed to kill a dragon either, Astrid would have to be foolish to put her desires above those of the village. This raid was a success.

With the end of the onslaught of dragons, however, Astrid's thoughts were able to return to Hiccup, and his lack of weaponry at the beginning of the raid. 'He wasn't still working in the forge, was he?' she wondered.

As Astrid began to put her considerable strength toward helping the village recover she looked for the small Viking, wondering where he had been running to.

She did find him later that night, also helping with the cleanup recovery, but her curiosity wasn't sated. Where had he gone? And did it have anything to do with his disappearances during dragon training and his sudden success as a Viking Warrior in the arena? She didn't know, but she vowed to find out.

\* \* \*

><p>The next day Astrid followed behind Hiccup as he walked through the forest, surprised at how silent he was. If he hadn't been engrossed in that stupid little notebook of his she would have been worried that he would notice her comparatively loud footsteps. She winced when she stepped on a branch with a particularly loud crack, ducking behind a tree as he paused. She peeked out to find him standing where he had stopped, head cocked as though he was listening hard, and was again surprised as she remained perfectly still, barely even daring to breath. Why was she so worried that Hiccup would find her? What did she care about being confronted for following him? She shrugged off her concerns, watching as Hiccup muttered to himself - sounding more like growls than actual words, though she wasn't close enough to hear him that well - and then set off, once again engrossed in his notebook.</p>

She followed once more, watching as he ducked behind some rocks, and walked slowly, unsure of what would await her on the other side. Once she had made her way through however, it took considerable effort for her to hold back a gasp, ducking behind a large rock as she surveyed the cove Hiccup had wandered into. A Hideous Zippleback was fishing in the lake, one head distracting the fish while the other grabbed it and vice versa. A Gronckle was snoring against the cavern wall, resting in the sunlight. Two Deadly Nadders were preening themselves, perched on a rock next to the lake as they used its reflection. A third Nadder was next to a Monstrous Nightmare that was almost directly in front of the entrance to the cove, curled up opposite a medium sized black dragon. Both of them had their eyes open while the Nadder slept and were staring at something behind a rock that she

couldn't see. Fear for Hiccup suddenly flooded her. Had he known this place was filled with dragons? Had he already been eaten?

She scanned the cove quickly, looking for evidence of an attack, before watching, shocked, as Hiccup walked out from behind the rock that several of the dragons were staring at. He was carrying some herbs and an empty pot but that wasn't what astonished her. What astonished her was the Terrible Terror perched on Hiccup's shoulders like a small pet. Its eyes were closed as it rested and Hiccup didn't even react as its tail curled up, wrapping lightly around his neck.

Hiccup set the herbs down next to the Monstrous Nightmare and continued on to the lake. Astrid couldn't understand it; he had walked calmly between the three dragons and didn't react at all to any of the others in the cove. She wanted to shout for him to get out of there but he didn't seem to be in any danger and she wasn't about to alert the dragons of her presence. He calmly filled the pot, taking it back to between the three dragons where a fire pit was set up. He hung the pot above it easily, the Night Fury - for what other dragon could it be? - lighting the fire without prompting. Hiccup reached his hand out to the dragon and Astrid tensed, just waiting for him to get his hand taken off.

Instead of the gruesome fate Astrid was imagining, Hiccup merely scratched the dragon's head, the beast almost purring in response. Behind Hiccup the Nightmare huffed and Astrid tensed again, watching as the creature nudged Hiccup from behind. Again Hiccup responded in a way she could have never imagined, turning with a laugh and giving the Nightmare a scratch on his chin as well.

As the water began to heat, Hiccup walked around the cove, the Terror on his shoulders not reacting to any of his movements. He stopped in front of the Gronckle, piling up some rocks in front of it, then moved on to the Zippelback, stopping the two heads from fighting over one fish as he broke it in half for them. They both crooned gratefully, again almost purring as he gave each of them a scratch.

It was then, staring at the Zippelback, that Astrid realized that these were the dragons from the arena - even the Terror that had escaped and the Nadder that had attacked Hiccup. And he trusted these beasts! Astrid didn't understand, her mind couldn't process what she saw and she was completely drawing a blank. Hiccup was walking around with dragons, the very dragons that had escaped from the arena, and he wasn't being attacked at all.

Without thinking she shifted to get a better view, her axe scraping up against the rock. Immediately Astrid froze, thoughts of her death racing through her mind. She carefully scanned the Cove but none of the dragons had paid attention to the small sound. When it seemed she was clear Astrid glanced down, hoping to adjust her axe or set it down, only to jump back in surprise at the three small Nadders at her feet.

Again, without thinking, she lifted her axe, prepared to bring it down on the three beasts before her. It was only the shout of "Astrid!" that save the dragons' lives.

Hiccup had seen her the moment she had stood up, raising the axe

above her head. She fumbled, the axe hitting the ground in front of the three hatchlings. Collectively they jumped back with a squawk, two flying away to hide behind one of the Nadders that had been preening itself while the third went straight for Hiccup. The light blue dragon flew in a quick circle before landing on Hiccup's head.

Astrid recoiled " the dragon had flown to Hiccup for help! Hiccup, a Viking, was in league with dragons. She could no longer deny the evidence before her eyes. She hefted the axe out of the ground, turning to run, only to come face to face with a fully grown Nadder. The dragon roared and Astrid hesitated, wondering if she had the time to raise her axe.

"Astrid, stop," Hiccup's voice was stronger than she had ever heard before but something about his tone made him sound remarkably tired. "Put the axe down."

She didn't move, neither lifting the axe nor putting it down, as she continued to stare down the dragon. When a growl sounded from behind her the dragon broke their stalemate, lifting its head to stare at something behind her. It growled in return, relaxing its body significantly but not moving from its position in front of the exit.

"Astrid, it's okay. You just scared him." Hiccup's voice attempted to reassure her but Astrid was furious.

"I scared him?!" she half-screamed at him, turning so that she could see both Hiccup and the dragon.

"Just put the axe down and I'll explain everything," he continued in his calm voice, seemingly non-phased by everything that had occurred; Astrid wondered how long he had been in league with dragons.

'I'm not going to win this,' Astrid realized, finally noticing that every single dragon was staring at her. She set down the axe slowly. Someone needed to tell Berk that Hiccup was a traitor and the only way to do that was to live through this. "Alright, what now?" she asked, turning her full gaze onto Hiccup.

"Why don't you come down here?" Hiccup offered.

She eyed the path thoughtfully, nodding in response. As she headed down " every single muscle tense and ready to run " Hiccup mumbled something under his breath. As if in response the Terror shifted, uncoiling from his neck and taking off. The Monstrous Nightmare followed suit, stopping to wake the Gronckle and grab the Zippleback before leaving the Cove. Astrid relaxed slightly, coming face to face with Hiccup; four fewer dragons wasn't the best but it was better than before.

Nevertheless, nothing Hiccup would say could convince her to relax completely, especially not with a dragon on his head. Hiccup seemed to notice her gaze though, reaching up and plucking the dragon off his head as though it was nothing. Astrid watched, astonished, as Hiccup " holding the dragon strongly with both hands " brought it up to his mouth. The village runt whispered in the creature's ear before stretching out his hands and releasing it.

Astrid watched as it flew above her head, straight toward the other Nadders. It squawked slightly and two of the fully grown Nadders, as well as the other two hatchlings, also took flight, herding the young ones away from the Cove. The remaining Nadder flew toward Astrid, stopping at the Nadder on the ground that was still sleeping. She turned her gaze back to Hiccup.

"Explain, now."

Hiccup smiled slightly. "Dragons aren't what you think they are Astrid. They can be reasoned with, spoken too, negotiated with."

She moved her gaze over the three dragons still in the Cove, the two that were awake were watching her closely. "So you've what â€œ| tamed them?" she asked harshly. That she could understand. Maybe. Taming them as pets, using them as guard dogs, that she could understand â€œ even if she didn't like it.

Hiccup shook his head. "Befriended them," he amended.

Astrid turned her hardened gaze back onto him. "You're a traitor," she corrected him, snarling fiercely.

Hiccup's smile seemed to grow sadder. He took his eyes off her, moving over to the two Nadders â€œ the one that was still sleeping and the one that seemed to be standing guard over it. Crouching down Hiccup put his hand lightly on the sleeping Nadder's nose. "Astrid, they're not what you think they are," he repeated. "They think, feel, dream. They're intelligent."

The Night Fury on the ground snorted before growling slightly and Astrid startled, wild thoughts running through her brain.

"Though some are less intelligent than others," Hiccup corrected, laughing slightly.

Astrid's eyes were wide as she stared at him. "Wait, can it understand you?"

Hiccup gave the Nadder a fond pat before standing and nodding at her. "Please Astrid. Try to understand."

But she couldn't. She marched forward, glaring at him, stopping only when the protective Nadder growled. "Hiccup, they kill us for fun," she emphasized, staring in disbelief at him. She had never given the village misfit much thought before but when she had, well, she had never expected this. Astrid had always considered Hiccup to be good-natured. Clumsy, small, and a bit foolish, but she had always thought that he had had the best interests of the village in mind. Apparently not. Hiccup didn't answer.

"I don't know how long this has gone on but it needs to stop! Hiccup, you can't just betray your home like this!" she shouted at him.

Hiccup hesitated slightly before answering. "Berk isn't my home," he said quietly.

Astrid couldn't believe what she had heard and Hiccup's eyes had widened slightly, as though he hadn't meant to say that. Before

either of them could react though, the Nadder on the ground shifted. Evidentially her shouting had woken it up. Both of them turned to look at the dragon and the Nadder standing guard crooned slightly, nudging the Nadder on the ground. Hiccup gave Astrid a glance before turning away, kneeling in front of it.

She watched as Hiccup crooned slightly, the Nadder lifting its head to warble in response. Hiccup rubbed its raised head lightly before standing once more, dipping some rags in the heated pot of water and wringing them out. As Hiccup tended to the Nadder's wing ¦ which, now that it was outstretched, Astrid could obviously see was wounded ¦ she contemplated leaving. While Hiccup was distracted would be the perfect time.

The only problem was the Night Fury watching her every move. Despite Hiccup's reassurance that dragons were 'different' ¦ 'Yeah right,' Astrid scoffed inwardly ¦ she was afraid that the beast would lunge if she tried to flee. And her axe was still on the ledge where she had entered the Cove.

Without looking away from her the Night Fury growled slightly. Astrid tensed, confusion flooding her mind as Hiccup absentmindedly growled back. At his response ¦ 'His response? Is he talking to dragons now?' Astrid wondered ¦ the dragon tensed slightly, growling again. Astrid had no trouble realizing that this louder growl was directed at her. She too tensed, refusing to move her eyes away from the dragon's. This time Hiccup looked up, growling sharply at the dragon, and Astrid didn't even care that she was interrupting a conversation with a Night Fury. She was done. She was exhausted from the raid last night and she had followed Hiccup the Useless on a whim only to be promptly terrified for her life by a herd of dragons hanging out with the village runt. And now he was talking their language.

"That's enough Hiccup!" she snarled. "You promised me answers ¦ what are you doing, why are you okay with all these dragons and why in Thor's name does it sound like you're talking to it?!"

When he looked up, surprised, and opened his mouth to speak Astrid interrupted him again. "You know what ¦ never mind. Nothing you say is going to convince me you're not a traitor. You're helping a dragon for Odin's sake."

Hiccup opened his mouth again. "Then I won't speak," he said slowly. "Just let me show you."

Astrid stared at the hand he outstretched to her in contempt and he quickly pulled back.

"\_Astrid\_," he said gently, her name a silent plea.

The young Viking warrior looked from the traitor to the dragon that had moved to stand behind him and then back again. She contemplated the exit to the Cove and the Night Fury watching her every move. She thought about running and knew she would never make it back alive. She thought about the dragons that had rested on Hiccup without harming him. She remembered the curious chirps of the young dragons she had almost killed. Her gaze moved once more to the Nadder peeking its head over Hiccup's shoulder.

"Alright," she said shortly, not moving her eyes from the dragon.

"What do you want me to do?"

Hiccup gestured for her to move closer, stepping aside so that there was nothing between her and the healthy Nadder that had been standing behind him. Astrid stepped forward reluctantly.

"Hold your hand out," Hiccup said softly, reaching forward and patting the Nadder's neck. The dragon responded by turning slightly to look at him, still keeping Astrid in view. If she didn't know better, Astrid would have said that the dragon almost looked at Hiccup fondly. She took another reluctant step forward and sent her own glance in Hiccup's direction.

'How odd is it,' she wondered, turning to look the dragon in the eyes, 'that me, a Viking, and the Nadder, a dragon, both turn to the same person for reassurance? And how odd is it that that person is Hiccup of all people, the village runt and outcast. Not quite a proper Viking, definitely not a proper dragon.'

And yet, Astrid mused as she raised her hand, slowly placing it on the dragon's head, between its large eyes, he seemed to trust the dragon more than her.

Hiccup was watching them both warily, seemingly ready to intervene, but after a long moment of resting her hand on the dragon Astrid was beginning to relax " and it seemed that the Nadder was too. She had never even contemplated touching a dragon with any intent other than harm - the fact that dragons were her enemy had been drilled into her head for as long as she could remember, there had been no other option but attack. Now though... now she didn't know what to think, but Hiccup was there to lead her on.

He stepped forward, smiling slightly and sending a glance at the Night Fury watching from the side. Some part of Astrid thought it looked kind of like an I-told-you-so glance and she didn't know whether or not it had been her imagination or if the dragon had actually rolled its eyes in response.

"What now?" she asked, surprised to find that she wasn't frightened any more. She wasn't sure that she trusted the Night Fury, but the Nadder wouldn't kill her, of that she was sure.

"How would you like to see Berk?" Hiccup asked.

Astrid swung her head around, moving her gaze from the dragon's eyes to stare at him, but Hiccup was already moving from his previous position. He stepped forward, fluidly lifting himself upward to settle on the Nadder's back. She stared at him, beyond taken aback as he stretched out a hand once more.

"What?!" she found herself asking, mentally denying the break in her voice.

Hiccup just grinned at her and repeated the question. "How would you like to see Berk?"

Astrid shook her head in disbelief, wide eyed at the sight of Hiccup sitting comfortably on the back of a dragon, like he belonged there, and forced herself to take a deep breath.

"Unless you're scared," Hiccup added almost playfully, seemingly elated at his victory of getting Astrid to touch the Nadder.

A scowl was Astrid's only response and she stepped forward, ignoring Hiccup's hand and hoisting herself onto the dragon behind him. Before she could ask any questions Hiccup leaned forward, patting the Nadder's neck, and they were off, flying into the air faster than Astrid had ever gone before. She swallowed back a yelp, refusing to embarrass herself in front of Hiccup - who wasn't at all bothered by the fast speed or the jolt of take-off. Before she knew it they were above the trees, higher than the tallest peak on Berk, and Astrid found herself leaning over hesitantly, gazing down in wonder at the forest below them. The speed of the dragon was incredible but the sights were even more so. Without even realizing it, Astrid found herself clinging tightly to Hiccup as they rose higher and higher into the air. When she glanced back to look at the cove they had just left she noted that the Night Fury was following close behind them - and she hadn't even heard the dragon take off.

Eventually they hit the clouds and rose above them and Astrid found herself gaping in wonder at the sights before her. Unconsciously she loosened her hold on Hiccup; she had never seen anything so beautiful in her whole life.

\* \* \*

><p>Astrid didn't know how long she remained behind Hiccup on the Nadder but, as Hiccup took her around the island, showing her the village and other locations she frequented, Astrid admitted to herself that she would never forget that day.</p>

Sometime during the flight Hiccup had grinned at her, slipping both his legs to the same side of the Nadder's neck before he fell casually from the dragon's back. Astrid had barely been able to keep herself from screaming as she threw herself forward, hugging the Nadder's neck and looking down for the fallen teenager. She had nearly screamed again to scold Hiccup for teasing her when she saw him sitting comfortably on the back of the Night Fury, laughing as he gave her a small wave. The black dragon had surged forward at his command, executing a wide loop over the Nadder in mid-air, and Astrid had only been able to shake her head, torn between frustration and wonder as the Night Fury guided them back to the Cove.

\* \* \*

><p>After landing, Astrid slipped from the back of her dragon easily, though with nowhere near the grace Hiccup showed in dismounting from his own dragon. "Hiccup, that ... that was amazing," she told him breathlessly, still wide eyed with wonder.</p>

Hiccup laughed, light and easy, and Astrid was struck with the realization that she couldn't ever remember hearing him laugh like that before. "It's the best feeling in the world," he agreed with her easily, patting his dragon's neck. "Astrid, I don't think you've been properly introduced. This is Toothless, Toothless, this is Astrid."

The Night Fury let out a huff and a small growl, eyeing her thoughtfully, but his gaze wasn't nearly as mistrustful as before. Astrid hesitated before nodding slightly in his direction. If Hiccup

was right, and he had been about everything else so far, than the dragons were far more intelligent than the Vikings had realized.

At her actions the dragon seemed to relax slightly, a low rumble emanating from deep in his throat. Hiccup let out another laugh.

Astrid looked between the two of them, surprised by the friendship between the dragon and his boy. Hiccup had trusted Toothless to catch him and Toothless had trusted Hiccup with Astrid. Her gaze moved to the Nadder she had spent the hours with and she realized Hiccup and Toothless weren't the only ones who had taken a leap of faith. The Nadder had trusted Hiccup too, and, to an extent, she had trusted Astrid as well. And Astrid had trusted the Nadder not to throw her off mid-air, she had allowed the dragon to steer their flight, trusting her because she trusted Hiccup.

"Does she have a name?" Astrid found herself asking, reaching up to pat the Nadder's neck as Hiccup had done with Toothless. It all led back to Hiccup she realized. Hiccup was the one who the dragons trusted and Hiccup was the one who she had trusted - he had bridged the gap between dragon and Viking and some distant part of her wondered if he could do it again. The rest of her mind was on the Nadder though. She turned to Hiccup for an answer.

He had moved from beside Toothless to the injured Nadder who had been waiting for them and smiled at her as she turned his way. "Names don't translate well," he admitted lightly. "So, no, she doesn't have a name yet."

Astrid's eyes moved to Hiccup injured shoulder, an injury she was surprised to realize that he had shown no signs of. "And she's the one..." she hesitated but Hiccup answered for her.

"The one from the arena, yeah," he said, nodding. "We staged the fight."

It was those words that pushed Astrid back to reality, that shoved aside her wonder and reminded her of the feud between dragons and Vikings.

"Hiccup, what are we going to do?" she asked suddenly, turning to him in alarm.

Hiccup held her gaze for a short moment, his expression solemn and his eyes seemingly older than he should be. He shook his head slightly and smiled, obviously trying to console her. "There are no more dragons in the arena," he reminded her, speaking strongly, "and there never will be again. I've got a few plans I'm working on to stop the dragon raids, I'll figure it out."

And Astrid - despite the fact that only yesterday she hardly gave Hiccup any thought, despite the years of fighting with dragons, despite her own hatred and fear of dragons only hours before - believed him.

\* \* \*

><p>It was only later that Astrid realized what Hiccup had said. After she spent a few hours in the Cove, helping Hiccup tend to the

injured Nadder. After she had learnt a few words in Dragonese. After she had assured him that she would keep his secret. After he had told her about the large dragon controlling the others and commanding the raids. After she had admitted that she wanted to ride her dragon again. After Hiccup had finally told her that Fishlegs already knew about the dragons.<p>

"What are \*\*\_we\_\* going to do?" she had asked him.

'\*\*\_I've\_\* got a few plans,' he had responded. '\*\*\_I'll\_\* figure it out.'

And she realized that, whatever had happened that day, it would take a lot more before he would begin to trust her. Hiccup was so used to being alone that he was determined to solve their problems on his own, probably not even realizing that people would be willing to help him. But Vikings didn't fight their battles alone and Astrid wasn't about to let Hiccup tackle this problem without letting him know that she would be right there with him.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: So, another long wait (I'm starting to sense a pattern) but not nearly as long as before. This chapter's a bit different, what with the different point of view, but as of right now this is the only chapter that's going to be that way. The rest of them should be from Hiccup's point of view. Let me know what you thought about the change.</strong>

\*\*Also, I realize the sheer number of dragons I've started to include might be a bit confusing so ask me if you need some clarification about which dragon is which, I'll be adding even more in the next chapter.\*\*

\*\*Again, I will never stop thanking all of you for the wonderful reviews - we're almost at 100! - or the many favorites and follows that you see fit to grant me with - almost 200 people are going to get an e-mail alert telling them they can read the next chapter of my story.\*\*

\*\*Thank you for your patience.\*\*

## 8. Time to Attack

One week later, Hiccup was in a good mood. Having freed all the dragons from the arena, stopped any possible deaths during the latest dragon raid, and convinced both Fishlegs and Astrid that dragons weren't the monsters they thought they were, he felt that he had reason to celebrate.

Neither Fishlegs nor Astrid showed any indication of alerting the rest of the villagers to his secret and both of them had flown on dragons as well. Fishlegs had even named the Gronckle from the arena "Meatlug" and was actively sneaking out of the village to see her at least every other day. Astrid hadn't gone so far as to name the Nadder she had flown, but she had asked Hiccup to visit her once since her first impromptu visit. Hiccup had obliged, but he had remained in the Cove with her, still not comfortable leaving her alone with too many dragons. Fishlegs he didn't have a problem with,

despite his friend's berserk tendencies Hiccup could see that the large Viking loved Meatlug far too much to hurt any of the dragons in the Cove. Astrid on the other handâ€¦ well let's just say that Hiccup was exercising caution.

The only thing that brought down his happiness was the problem of the Red Death. As such, Hiccup planned to implement one of his many ideas that day, hoping that it would do something to stop, or at least halt, the reign of the monster at the dragon's nest.

Getting to the Cove early in the morning, Toothless and Hiccup led the dragons to a cliff overhanging the ocean, preparing to wait for the wild dragons Hiccup had spoken to before. When he had formed his plan he hadn't known that he was about to start dragon training, nor had he known that he would rescue the five dragons he had. That meant he had asked for other dragons' help with his plan, and had arranged a meeting point accordingly.

Now all the seven dragons (Toothless, Strangler, Meatlug, the other three dragons from Berk, and the injured Nadder) had to do was wait for the arrival of the five dragons he had asked for help.

His good mood still in place however, Hiccup decided to have some fun with the dragons before they set off on their risky plan. When the dragons did arrive, it didn't take much convincing to get them to have a little fun before their dangerous mission â€“ all the dragons he had invited enjoyed spending time with the dragon and his human rider.

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup laughed joyfully, leaning forward as he and Toothless shot out from under the shadow of a Monstrous Nightmare. He and the other dragons had decided to play a game he liked to call Catch the Dragon. The game was a free-for-all, each dragon for himself, and Hiccup loved it. The object was to tag your fellow dragons while avoiding being tagged yourself. If you were hit you were grounded for the rest of the game. As the fastest dragon (or dragon-rider combination, but really, they were the only one of those), Toothless and Hiccup usually won.</p>

The other dragons liked to call it Catch the Night Fury, and usually teamed up against them to take them out. As such, as soon as Toothless had dodged the as of yet unnamed Nightmare they immediately swerved to the side, ducking away from the large Timberjack Hiccup had named Ripwing a year ago.

They swooped down, taking out Bumblebee (a Gronckle Hiccup had befriended two years ago) and then dodged to the side once more as they heard the tell-tale wing beats of Mist, the Changewing who was currently blending into the sky. Behind them echoed a playful shriek as Blizzard nabbed the Nadder from the arena, landing on her back from behind and quickly pushing off again.

Hiccup and Toothless hovered slightly as Meatlug flew from them at the side and Mist dove toward them from above. Dodging at the last moment, they both grinned in triumph as Mist narrowly avoided a collision, flicking the Gronckle with her tail as she swept by and eliminating her from the game.

Ripwing laughed loudly at Meatlug's misfortune, casting a large shadow over the Zippleback as he descended and eliminated him as well. The two Nightmares retaliated by teaming up and double tagging the Timberjack.

The game had started with ten dragons: Hiccup and Toothless, Blizzard, Mist, Bumblebee, Ripwing, Longstride (a large, purple Monstrous Nightmare), and the four unnamed dragons from the ring. Now, resting on the ground with the injured Deadly Nadder from the raid and Strangler the Terrible Terror were Bumblebee, Ripwing, Meatlug, and the Nadder and Zippleback from the arena. That left Hiccup and Toothless, Blizzard, Mist, Longstride, and the unnamed Nightmare.

Toothless rolled away as Blizzard swooped down at them, Hiccup jumping off his back to land on Longstride. The Nightmare shrieked in surprise, laughing playfully before trying to toss Hiccup off, and Hiccup laughed as well. He ran along the dragon's back, jumping from Longstride to Blizzard â€“ who promptly spun upside down. This time Hiccup was properly thrown off, free-falling through the sky. He adjusted himself as Toothless flew toward him, landing perfectly in the saddle. Together they pulled upward, aware that it would be rather easy to tag them as they got settled.

Recognizing the duo as the greatest threat, Mist and the Nightmare called a truce, the Nightmare diving from above as the Changewing waited below. Toothless easily dodged the Nightmare but the dragons on the ground caught onto the plan. Just as Hiccup ducked the dragon's reach they cried out, yelling in unison. The distraction had the effect of masking the sound of the Changewing, and, unable to see Mist approach, Hiccup and Toothless were tackled gently from below.

Hiccup let out a good natured laugh, recognizing that they were beaten, and the two descended quickly. Above them Mist was quick to tackle the Nightmare, who had been momentarily distracted by their victory, and the game was over. As the two of them landed Hiccup laughed again. '\_We'll have to change the name to Catch the Changewing,\_' he joked. '\_That's the second time in a row you've won.\_'

Mist grinned proudly. '\_You can't catch what you can't see,\_' she boasted.

Longstride, a good friend of Mist's, tackled her playfully. '\_Next time you will be the first to loose!\_' she threatened.

Blizzard swiveled his head toward Hiccup. '\_May we move on to our plan? The ice will form soon and Midnight wants to gather fish tonight.\_'

The other dragons echoed his sentiments. Hiccup knew that Longstride and Bumblebee would migrate south when winter set in and the others needed to build up their nests. He nodded. '\_All right, there's no point in putting it off any longer.\_'

Without prompting Toothless took off with quick strokes, flanked by dragons on either side. Twelve dragons of all different shapes and sizes flew through the air, making their way to Hiccup's Cove. As they landed Hiccup was surprised to see Astrid there. She seemed

shocked by the sheer number of dragons and backed away as they landed.

"Astrid!" he cried out, surprised â€“ remembering to switch to Norse at the last moment. "What are you doing here?" Last time she had visited she had asked him first, still uneasy around so many dragons and reluctant to approach them herself.

"I promised I'd give this a try didn't I?" she questioned, her fingers tightening into fists with the absence of an axe to hold onto.

Hiccup approached her sheepishly. "Yeah, but umâ€œ I figured you meant you'd think about it. Or that you'd stop killing dragons. Not that you would come back on your own. Not that there's anything wrong with you coming back I just â€œ didn't expect you to," he trailed off, aware of how nervous he sounded, and Toothless growled impatiently behind him.

'\_Forget the Viking already--' Hiccup didn't know if his dragon would ever forgive the villagers for how they treated him. Toothless knew Astrid's name perfectly well but refused to use it '-\_let's go.\_'

There were grumbles of agreement behind him, particularly from those who knew of Hiccup's history with his village, and Hiccup sighed.

"What's going on?" Astrid asked, peering confusedly at the large horde of dragons, her whole body tense.

"Look, now isn't a good time," Hiccup admitted. "I'd love for you to give this a try but later, maybe in a few hours." He was still reluctant to turn his back and leave Astrid alone with the dragons, especially Toothless, but he too was anxious to get the plan in motion. He headed over to his lean-to, grabbing the sacks of the Blue Oleander that he had been gathering for the past three months.

The Blue Oleander was a type of flower that was poisonous to reptiles â€“ except, for some reason, Scauldrons, who loved to eat them. It was a pity that Hiccup didn't know any Scauldrons personally but he made do with what he had. Each sack was wrapped in wads of clothing with a convenient carrying loop so that the dragons that carried them remained as far away from the flowers as possible.

He quickly dragged out the six sacks, ignoring the confused looks from Astrid, placing one in front of Mist, Bumblebee, Blizzard, Longstride, Ripwing, and Toothless each. He had thought of the plan long before he had been placed in dragon training, taking months to harvest all the flowers, and so six sacks was all he had.

"What's going on?" Astrid asked again, angrily this time.

Hiccup turned to her, his good mood fading. Somehow the people of Berk always managed to turn him into a nervous wreck. 'Why is it that whenever I face a dragon I'm perfectly calm but give me a Viking and I want to run and hide?' he wondered to himself.

"Astrid, it's â€œ complicated," he didn't know quite how to explain it, "and quite a long story."

"So give me the short version," she demanded.

Toothless huffed behind him but Hiccup knew that Astrid wasn't going to let it go. He gestured to the sacks on the ground. "These bags contain a flower that's poisonous to reptiles, and we're going to feed it to the Queen dragon. The Red Death. She controls almost all dragons that get near her â€“ she's the reason for the raids," He turned, mounting Toothless, before nodding down at Astrid. "See you in a couple of hours." He honestly didn't know if that was the truth. Every time he neared the dragon's nest he feared for his life, and the life of Toothless. He also didn't have a clue if the plan would work. If it didn't, then at the very least the beast would have a monstrous headache.

But Astrid surprised him before he could take off. "Let me come with you."

He looked down at her, startled, before shaking his head. "Too dangerous," he countered. When she opened her mouth to protest he interrupted her. "Astrid, you can barely even touch a dragon," he said, a bit harsher than he had intended.

She clamped her mouth shut, staring at him, and he nodded once more. '\_Right then\_, ' he switched to Dragonese, turning back to address the dragons, '\_are we ready\_?' There were growls of affirmation and Hiccup turned forward, gave Astrid one last look, and took off. Behind him eleven other dragons rose with their sacks in their claws and together they soared toward the Red Death's nest.

\* \* \*

><p>The dragons not participating in the plan separated from them when they reached the mist that surrounded the nest, calling out and wishing them luck as they flew back the way they had come. Hiccup doubted they would return to the Cove until they knew Astrid had left but he wasn't worried about their safety, truth be told he was more worried about his own, and about the safety of the dragons with him.</p>

The mist was thick, reaching out and hiding the Queen's lair from discovery, and Hiccup knew from his father that it made the sea almost impossible to navigate. Sailing the waters close to the nest was made doubly difficult by the sea stacks hidden in the mist, rising from the water and causing more than one shipwreck. Not that Hiccup would know personally, he had never sailed these waters â€“ he had always flown.

Together the group flew as low as they could, hoping to avoid other dragons, while still remaining, for the most part, above the sea stacks. Hiccup knew it would be better if they saved their energy for their escape, rather than spend it weaving in and out of the tall towers of rock. They flew as close to each other as they could as well, Hiccup's trained eyesight and above average hearing allowing him to make out the location of each of the dragons following him, despite the poor visibility. He could sense their nervousness and hear the tension in the way they flew, stiff and scared, but he knew none of them would back out. Each of them knew exactly what they were getting into, and had known for months. They had promised Hiccup they would follow him to their deaths.

Hiccup hoped it wouldn't come to that. He tried to think of something to say to assuage their nerves but nothing came to mind. The silence of the mists was oppressive and Hiccup hesitated to open his mouth for fear of alerting something hidden in its depths. He exchanged glances with Toothless as they flew silently onward and then spared a glance backward at the dragons behind him.

Meeting his gaze seemed to give the dragons strength though, solving his problem of trying to speak to them and reassure them. The ones Hiccup could see righted themselves, relaxing as they flew, and the ones he couldn't seemed to relax as well, if their wing beats were any indication. He moved his gaze forward once more, grinning slightly, and exchanged glances with his dragon again.

Toothless gaze seemed slightly exasperated and smug, saying all he need to without words, and Hiccup recalled a conversation they had had quite some time ago.

\* \* \*

><p>It had been three years ago, at a time when Hiccup was so unnoticed in the village that he had spent three whole days in the Cove without anyone noticing it. (Berk was busy meeting with another tribe, his father was busy with being chief, and Gobber had been busy discussing techniques with the other tribe's smith). Those three days, well, they were days that Hiccup knew he would never forget.</p>

When Hiccup arrived at the Cove, early on the morning of the first day, he hadn't planned to spend three days away from Berk. He had thought about staying the night perhaps, but never before had he been gone even a full forty-eight hours, let alone seventy-two.

He and Toothless had set out for the day excitedly, preparing to spend a long time together, something that hadn't happened in a week because Hiccup had been needed for the preparation of the tribe gathering (or meeting really, it was only two tribes). They planned to spend their time exploring, adding to the map that Hiccup had been drawing, and were looking for a bit of adventure.

Hiccup brought the small sword he had taught himself to use by observing other Vikings and a few other odds and ends he thought he might need if they ended up not returning to the Cove for the night. Together they flew out over the open ocean, ready to explore a new island.

\* \* \*

><p>Eventually they landed on a beach neither of them had ever set foot on. Hiccup let Toothless take a small rest, taking a drink of the water he had brought for them, and then they took off again. This time the flew higher but slower, taking in the island from above as Hiccup situated his notebook on his lap, slowly sketching the landmarks. He had just gotten down the outline of the island â€“ it wasn't very large and a half hour was all Toothless needed to circle it from high above â€“ when Toothless faltered, catching his attention.</p>

Startled out of his concentration, Hiccup met Toothless's gaze.

'\_What is it bud?\_' he asked.

Toothless, looking concerned, nodded downward. '\_Does that look like fire to you?\_' he replied.

It did. Hiccup frowned. '\_Maybe it's Vikings?\_' he said uncertainty, nudging Toothless in that direction without words.

Having the same thoughts, Toothless followed Hiccup's silent directions, circling lower so they could get a better view of the island below them. It \_was\_ fire, they soon discovered, but it wasn't Vikings. It was dragons, engaged in a firefight, and Toothless hesitated before he flew any lower.

Feuding dragons were dangerous and he wasn't about to place Hiccup, still a child, in harm's way. Hiccup had no such worries though, leaning over as he tried to get a better view of the fight. It was hard to spot the dragons but Hiccup quickly realized that Changewings were responsible for the fire he had seen â€“ which didn't make sense, Changewings spit acid, not fire.

His question was answered when the ground erupted, a Whispering Death shooting upward and looking around widely for the Changewings.

Hiccup wanted to get involved â€“ he hated conflict â€“ but he didn't have a clue which side to take and he knew Toothless would never agree to try to break up the fighting. Besides, with a Whispering Death involved it wasn't likely there would be a peaceful outcome. But Hiccup knew better than to judge based on appearances and for all he knew it was the Changewings who had confronted the Whispering Death, not the other way around.

On his instruction, still remaining far above the firefight, Toothless shot a bolt of purple fire toward the Whispering Death, the only dragon they could see, and narrowly missed. (On purpose of course â€“ Night Furies never miss). Hiccup knew that with the sun still high overhead the dragon wouldn't leave the shaded safety of the forest.

At the near miss the Whispering Death turned toward them, shrieking in anger, and shot a bolt of fire toward them. Given their altitude the shot didn't even come close to hitting them but the flames blocked their line of sight and when they looked again the dragon was gone, having disappeared into the Earth where he had come from.

Hiccup convinced Toothless to land, though he did so reluctantly, and together the two of them waited in plain sight for the Changewings to show themselves. Toothless held himself at the ready, prepared to take off at a moment's notice, and Hiccup was tense in the saddle, notebook having long since been put away.

One Changewing slowly made itself visible, slinking into view, but Hiccup was willing to bet that there were more in the forest around them.

Though he eyed them curiously, no doubt thrown by the human on the dragon's back, the Changewing didn't hesitate to speak up. '\_We do not need your help trespassers!\_' he declared angrily.

Hiccup relaxed slightly, it seemed as the Whispering Death had been the invader and the Changewings the defenders. He had made the right choice. '\_So this is your island then?' he asked for confirmation.

There was a hiss of shock at his words and to his right a Changewing flickered in and out of view in surprise. The Changewing in front of them narrowed his eyes, focusing on Toothless and ignoring Hiccup. '\_You allow a human to ride you? To sit on your back and speak your tongue?'

Toothless only growled in response. '\_That \_human,' he declared angrily in response, '\_makes his own decisions. You should answer his question.\_'

Hiccup grimaced at the thinly veiled threat but didn't protest Toothless's words. '\_And this human,' he continued for his dragon, '\_can also understand everything you're saying.\_'

The Changewing reluctantly shifted his eyes toward Hiccup and acquiesced. They managed to have a brief conversation about the Whispering Death that had invaded their territory but the Changewing adamantly refused any help. They would not attack Hiccup or Toothless they conceded, so long as they remained out of Changewing affairs. Hiccup wasn't happy about the terms.

'\_We're not leaving until the Whispering Death does,' he declared. '\_So if you need help, come and find us. I'm sure you'll know where to look.\_' With these parting words, dragon and rider took flight, making their way to a high ridge where they could set up camp.

Soon after setting up they discovered that the Changewing leader had sent two sentries after them. Of course, they never would have discovered it if the two young Changewings hadn't revealed themselves. The wild dragons were curious about the human who spoke their tongue and the dragon who allowed him to ride on his back and, thanks to Toothless's actions earlier, knew the pair wasn't a threat to them.

Hiccup and Toothless spent the day talking to them, resting while they remained alert for any sign of the Whispering Death. They told tales of their adventures together, Hiccup answering all their questions, and the Changewings shared tales of their own, answering Hiccup's questions about the island and their way of life. He hadn't seen many Changewings before, and never had he spoken to them.

Of the two visitors, one was female, constantly flickering in and out of sight as she exercised her camouflage ability without caution. The other was male, with a shorter snout than the first, and clearly the less curious of the two. No doubt he had been roped into revealing himself by his excitable partner.

As night fell, and the Changewings showed no sign of leaving, Hiccup began to discuss his plans for dealing with the Whispering Death when it returned. He spent the night on the island, completely forgetting about the goings-on at Berk.

\* \* \*

><p>The next day the Whispering Death attacked twice. The first time Hiccup honored the Changewings' wishes, watching from afar but not interfering. It was a long time before the rogue dragon retreated and many of the island dragons were hurt in the ensuing battle. The Whispering Death was not to be trifled with and Hiccup knew he couldn't just sit and watch a second time.</p>

Sure enough the intruder returned later that day, still not beaten back by the Changewings' assault, and Hiccup and Toothless flew into battle, their two watchdogs unable to hold them back.

Toothless dove quickly, distracting the Whispering Death before it could fire at a revealed Changewing (injured and unable to focus on camouflage at the moment), and then quickly rose again. Dusk had already fallen, so the Whispering Death followed, no longer deterred by the sun that had set only moments ago.

Working together, Hiccup and Toothless fluidly dodged the ensuing fireball, sweeping around again to fire their own shot against the dragon's scaly hide. Their Changewing sentries had followed them and took the opportunity to fire acid at the distracted Whispering Death, causing him to scream in anger. Bolstered by the sudden attack, the remaining Changewings on the ground took flight, attacking once more and driving the Whispering Death into the ground.

Hiccup and Toothless landed to find themselves surrounded by Changewings. This time, the leader listened.

\* \* \*

><p>Back in the present, Hiccup smiled to himself as he remembered what had occurred next. He had outlined his plan for defeating the invader and the Changewings had listened, slightly skeptical but aware that he had helped them twice despite the fact that he had absolutely no reason to. They had stayed on the island a second night and executed the plan the next day, driving the Whispering Death off the island.</p>

Because Toothless had been slightly injured — and had injured the Whispering Death in turn — they remained on the island one last night, Hiccup helping with caring for all the injured dragons, not just his own. He would never forget the friends he had made on the island, or what Toothless had said to him as they had left.

'\_You are a natural leader Hiccup,\_' Toothless had told him. '\_Be careful with what you use your words for — these dragons would follow you anywhere if you merely asked it of them.\_'

It had been a compliment and a warning in one and Hiccup was still continuing to understand what his friend had meant. These dragons were following him to a place several of them had been held against their will, forced to please their Queen when they had no desire to do so. And they were returning because he had asked them to. He only hoped that he lived up to their expectations of him.

As they neared the nest Hiccup focused once more on the plan, ready to defend each and every dragon that flew with him.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: A quick update? It's been a while since that's happened. I hope you don't mind the flashback, or the slight cliffhanger I left you with.<strong>

\*\*Like I said last chapter, I know the sheer amount of dragons I'm including is potentially confusing, so don't hesitate to ask if you need something cleared up.\*\*

\*\*This is my first story to reach 100 reviews, so thank you to all you wonderful readers who helped me get there. One kind reviewer pointed out to me that some of my phrasing could have people mistaking this for a Hiccup/Toothless pairing - which it is not - so I just wanted to clarify that this is a friendship story.\*\*

\*\*Thanks so much for being so awesome - let me know if you liked the chapter!\*\*

## 9. Wanted at the Forge

Approaching the nest, the six dragons landed on the shore first, setting down their burdens and resting their wings as they huddled in a circle. The easy part of the plan was complete, but now came the hard part: getting the Red Death to actually eat the poisonous flowers. Of course, Hiccup hadn't come this far only to run out of ideas. He had planned for this. There had been several ideas that had run through the young inventor's mind when he first considered poisoning the queen dragon.

The first had been to deliver the flowers after a raid, when she was already expecting to be fed and would open her mouth to receive whatever the dragons in her thrall had to offer. He had quickly decided that that wouldn't work. Waiting until after a raid relied too much on timing. Hiccup would have to be aware of the raid first of all (it wasn't just Berk that was subject to the dragons' attacks), and then he would have to gather the six dragons (five excluding Toothless) that were part of the plan. There would be no way of scheduling a time, or knowing if his friends were ready. Too much relied on circumstance and Hiccup wasn't going to execute such an important plan with so many risks.

The second plan had been to find a way to get the wild dragons to pick up the flowers the next time they raided Berk. Hiccup dismissed that idea almost immediately, it would likely have gotten the attention of the Vikings and there was no way to guarantee that all of the flowers would have been carried to the nest. If a captive dragon had gotten hungry and eaten them, it could have gotten seriously ill and died, especially considering the sheer number of flowers Hiccup had gathered.

A third plan had briefly been considered, Hiccup and Toothless delivering all the flowers themselves slowly, one bunch after the other. Toothless was quick to veto that plan and Hiccup easily agreed. It was too dangerous and too slow. The Red Death was already capable of recognizing Hiccup and Toothless as the pests that had plagued her for years, and while they might have been able to enter the nest once or twice without raising suspicion, they would have been recognized sooner or later.

Finally Hiccup returned to his initial plan, gathering friends of his

to carry the flowers. Instead of waiting for a raid, however, they had decided to schedule a time to deliver the poison.

Method of travel decided, Hiccup's mind had then run through several more plans to get the queen to open her mouth as they entered. They didn't want to fly too close, for fear of getting eaten themselves, but he was afraid that she wouldn't recognize the cloth wrapped flowers as food. It wasn't altogether uncommon for lone dragons to bring her food between raids, but she could smell that food coming and the flowers smelled nothing like fresh meat.

Hiccup had prepared for that though, hoping to trick the Red Death into believing that the dragons were carrying fish. The cloths were old and Hiccup had used them over the past few months as carrying sacks for the fish he ate in the cove. He had rubbed fish oil on them, and used them to hold fish bones from his meals. Quite frankly, the cloths stank.

Not prepared to bet on the queen's acute sense of smell however, Toothless and the other dragons paused on the beach now to set down their sacks and gather a few more fish.

As the dragons took off, prepared to do just that, Hiccup waited alone on the beach. He would add a few fresh fish to each sack, hoping to strengthen the smell, and then the six of them would fly into the nest and deliver the flowers.

While he waited for the dragons to return, Hiccup mentally went over the plan in his mind. Blizzard, as the second fastest dragon, would go first, easily able to maneuver out of the way if something went wrong. Bumblebee, the slowest, would follow behind him, keeping a distance back until safety was assured. Longstride and Ripwing would follow, their large wing spans meant that maneuverability would be difficult in the mountain and Hiccup didn't want them to be trapped if the Red Death realized what was happening. Mist would be next, easily blending in and hard to detect, and Toothless and Hiccup would fly in last.

It was more and more likely as each bundle was delivered that the queen would realize what was happening. The first and last deliveries were the most dangerous, and Hiccup had planned carefully to eliminate any injuries to his friends. Though Toothless was reluctant to place Hiccup in danger (and had in fact suggested that Hiccup stay behind) he was also aware of just how capable his rider was. He also agreed that, of the six dragons, he should take the most dangerous position and it hadn't been hard to get the other dragons to see the logic of the plan.

\* \* \*

><p>Each dragon returned one by one with fish and Hiccup carefully distributed the fresh morsels between each sack. By the time the last dragon set down on the beach the task was done and Hiccup looked around at his friends before him. Now was the last time to back out but the rider wasn't going to dishonor his friends' choices by suggesting that they do so. They had made their decisions, and he had made his. It was time.</p>

At a silent nod from Hiccup as he slipped back into Toothless' saddle the dragons took flight, quickly forming a line in the order Hiccup

had decided. Blizzard led the way into the mountain, Bumblebee staying back a bit as they anxiously waited to see what would happen. As hoped for, they reached the center of the nest easily and five of the dragons set down in the side tunnel as they waited to see if the queen would take the bait.

Blizzard hesitated briefly and then shot forward, hovering above the cavernous hole with the sack of poison dangling from his claws. A few dragons around the edges perked up, watching closely, but for the most part no one paid any attention to the delivery. Soon " but far too long a wait for Hiccup's anxious mind " the mountain seemed to shift as the monster at its center moved, stretching her neck forward to receive her snack. The Nadder dropped his package, winging his way out of the nest and toward the meet up point.

Hiccup breathed a sigh of relief as Bumblebee slipped forward, followed by Ripwing and then Longstride. Everything was going to plan. When the fourth sack had been deposited and Mist began to creep forward, Hiccup realized that the queen had noticed \_something\_. There was a loud grumble from deep in the mountain and it was clear that the Red Death wasn't happy with the meals she was receiving.

The long neck lunged forward even more, searching for a dragon to take out her anger on, but Mist was already gone, slipping through the tunnels to safety. Not wanting to distract his dragon with words, Hiccup merely placed a hand on Toothless' neck, knowing his friend would understand the gesture. This was their last chance but Hiccup was confident that Toothless would succeed. Surging forward with the speed of a Night Fury, Hiccup and Toothless flew just above the monstrous teeth, dropping the last of the flowers into the gaping maw.

A loud roar echoed through the mountain behind them as they fled but Hiccup was confident that the beast wouldn't follow them. He hadn't been able to make her leave the nest yet. A few small dragons and one human weren't enough of a problem for her to handle on her own. It would take a lot more than that.

Sure enough, two Monstrous Nightmares and a Deadly Nadder were the ones to pursue him instead, detaching themselves from the tunnel walls.

Toothless rolled, dodging the first Nightmare, then surged upward to dodge the second, but the Nadder caught him by surprise. Struck from underneath, Toothless careened toward the cave wall, desperately trying to angle himself so that Hiccup wouldn't be crushed. Hiccup had been flying Toothless for a long time though, through many dragon attacks and bad storms. One surprise hit wasn't enough to stop him. As Toothless hit the wall, his left wing crumpling slightly, Hiccup was jumping off of the Night Fury, leaping onto the Nadder's back with his dagger in his hand.

While Toothless scrambled to right himself in the tight corridors, getting his feet under him and pushing off the wall once more, Hiccup clung tight to the Nadder's neck. He had brought his dagger with him but he hoped that he wouldn't have to use it. Instead he forcefully pushed the dragon's head to the right, hoping to get it to collide with the other cave wall, as Toothless shot a bolt of purple lightening back in the direction they had come, scattering the

Nightmares who were still following.

Finally Hiccup succeeded in crashing the Nadder, barely managing to get his leg out of the way before the wild dragon smashed into the cavern wall, and he could tell he had scraped his leg in the close shave. Nevertheless he didn't hesitate as he stood once more, the Nadder's shriek ringing in his ears as he jumped off a dragon again, landing in Toothless' saddle and leaning over his dragon. Toothless surged forward, shooting out of the tunnel. Now in the open air, dragon and rider easily lost their pursuers in the sea stacks that surrounded the mountain, slowing down as they neared the edge of the mist.

Hiccup's right leg was bleeding and Toothless' left wing was almost certainly bruised but they had done it. They had (hopefully) poisoned the queen and they had escaped from the nest for the umpteenth time since they had discovered it many years before.

\* \* \*

><p>Out of the mist, Toothless slowed his pace, taking long easy strokes as they veered toward the small island they had decided to regroup on. All five dragons were seated together, anxiously looking toward the sky, and there were cries of greeting as Hiccup and Toothless came into view. Toothless replied with a triumphant roar of his own and dove forward, landing in the gap between Blizzard and Ripwing.</p>

Ripwing was quick to sniff out Hiccup's injured leg but Hiccup was equally as quick in reassuring his friends that it was a minor injury. Grinning, he slipped off of Toothless, wincing slightly and keeping his weight on his left leg as he stood.

'\_Thank you,\_' he said to the dragons gathered before him.

Blizzard nodded courteously (a gesture he had picked up from Hiccup), Ripwing was quick to proclaim that there was: '\_No need for thanks.\_', and Longstride added in that: '\_We should be thanking you, for giving us a chance to rid ourselves of that monster.\_' The other dragons agreed with their friends.

The deed accomplished, Blizzard was the first to leave, no doubt eager to reassure Midnight that all had gone well. Bumblebee followed suit, going his own way, as Mist and Longstride took off together. Soon only Hiccup, Toothless, and Ripwing remained on the beach. Hiccup knew that the Timberjack would likely remain with them for a while, as fond of Hiccup and Toothless as he was. He began to examine Toothless' wing, trying to determine the extent of the injury, while Ripwing watched with concern evident in his movements.

'\_I'm alright,\_' Toothless insisted as he allowed Hiccup to poke and prod his left wing, '\_it's just bruised. You should stay off that leg.\_'

Hiccup snorted even as Ripwing gave a noise of agreement. '\_Please,\_' he replied, '\_you know I've had way worse. I'll stop limping by tomorrow.\_'

Toothless huffed but couldn't refute Hiccup's agreement. He shook himself instead, pulling his wing from Hiccup's grasp. '\_Just walk

carefully,\_' he said instead.

'Well then you fly carefully,\_' Hiccup countered easily. The two had nagged each other about their injuries for so long that it was more out of habit than concern. Each of them would know exactly if the other was seriously wounded. '\_Ripwing can give me a ride back.\_'

The Night Fury grumbled unhappily, as he always did whenever Hiccup rode any other dragon, but agreed. Ripwing, who was watching anxiously for the elder dragon's approval, crowed his delight the second Toothless' agreement was voiced. Hiccup grinned at the young dragon's excitement.

'\_C'mon,\_' he said, '\_let's go home\_. '

Ripwing, Toothless, and Hiccup â€“ the young warrior seated on the large Timberjack â€“ slowly made their way back to the Cove together. They flew leisurely, mindful of Toothless' bruised wing and in no great hurry, and passed the dragons who hadn't accompanied them on their way. None of them had yet returned to the Cove and they took flight as they spied the three victorious travelers, eager to enact their own part of the plan. Hiccup watched as the six dragons separated in the distance, each of them going their own way except for the still slightly injured Nadder, who remained with the Nadder from the arena.

He grinned, grateful that everything was still going to plan, and the three of them continued on their way home. It didn't take them long to return after that and Ripwing allowed Toothless to land first. The smaller dragon made his way down, snaking to the side of the Cove, and the Timberjack folded his large wings, falling gently into the enclosed area. He bent down his long neck, allowing Hiccup to slide off, only for the dragon rider to stop in surprise and stare at the sight that greeted him.

Astrid and Fishlegs were waiting for them, seated on a rock as they watched Hiccup dismount the large dragon. Hiccup could see their nervousness at the sight of Ripwing, but Fishlegs was more excited than nervous and Astrid was focused on the blood on his leg. Neither of them seemed to realize how unusual it was that he wasn't flying on Toothless.

Not knowing quite what to say, Hiccup moved again, shaking his head in surprise and making his way toward his dragon. "Astrid, Fishlegs â€“ what are you guys doing here?" he asked as he began to remove Toothless' saddle.

"You've been gone for hours," Astrid was quick to say, sounding worried as she slipped off the rock and stood before him.

Hiccup shot her a look â€“ he'd been gone for days before, not one person had noticed then.

Fishlegs seemed to sense the tension. "I wanted to see Meatlug," he added. "Then Astrid told me what you were doing," he sent a nervous look at the strong teenager beside him, "we wanted to see if you were okay."

Smiling gratefully in Fishlegs' direction â€“ and a little taken

aback by the genuine concern " Hiccup lifted up the saddle. "I'm fine," he reassured the larger boy, even as he limped slightly to deposit the saddle in his hut, "we just got a little bruised, that's all."

He returned from the makeshift house to find Astrid skeptical and Fishlegs uncertain. "Look, everything went smoothly," he continued, "we went to the nest, delivered the poison, and came back. You know the nest is far away."

Astrid raised an eyebrow at that. "No we don't!" she protested. "That's the problem " you aren't telling us anything! Those missions to find the nest only take so long because we wander around in the mist for days trying to find \_something. \_For all we know the nest could be two islands away. You can't keep everything to yourself Hiccup!"

It was clear that she'd been planning these words ever since he had left, hastily describing nothing but the bare minimum of his plan. "Astrid," Hiccup said plainly, trying to calm her, "the nest isn't two islands away. You wouldn't even be able to find it without a dragon."

"But you know where it is," she countered.

Hiccup didn't deny it. "Even if I did lead the Vikings to the nest it wouldn't do anything," he rationalized. "Astrid, you haven't seen the monster that lives there. Spears and swords would mean nothing to her " Berk would be helpless, and there's absolutely nothing they could do."

"So it's up to you then " Hiccup off to save the village on his own," Astrid said resentfully.

He held back a sigh. He wasn't trying to be some kind of dashing hero, setting off on a quest to save the world " he was just trying to save lives, to help the people who couldn't help themselves. "I'm not on my own," he reminded Astrid.

Her eyes shifted to the two dragons, who had been watching the conversation silently. She hesitated, clearly holding back some retort. Hiccup couldn't help but wonder what she would have said if she hadn't met the dragons, hadn't flown on the Nadder. No doubt she was skeptical of how much the dragons truly helped him.

There was an uncomfortable silence and Fishlegs finally spoke up. "Couldn't you let us help?" he asked nervously, eyes flickering between Hiccup and Astrid.

Hiccup paused, taken aback by the genuine offer. Trust Fishlegs to startle him twice in one day. To be completely honest with himself, Hiccup hadn't even considered allowing Astrid or Fishlegs to get involved in his attempt to kill the queen. It was dangerous, and Hiccup knew that even better than the Vikings at the village. He knew details that they didn't and he knew that the kind of danger they would find if they ever reached the nest wasn't what they were expecting. They would get slaughtered. To ensure their own survival they would need to be able to fully cooperate with dragons. Hiccup knew that the Vikings weren't ready for that, although the two in front of him were close.

He took a moment to consider their request â€“ realizing that they did, to an extent, trust the dragons â€“ but he knew he wouldn't let them help. He shook his head.

Astrid seemed to be holding back a snarl. "Fine!" she proclaimed unhappily. "Don't let us help â€“ eventually you'll realize that you won't be able to do this on your own!"

Holding back a sigh, Hiccup was very glad that he had denied their offer. They still didn't understand that he wasn't on his own â€“ he hadn't been, not for a long time. Sure in the beginning he had been desperate for their friendship, unwanted and alone as he was, but nowâ€œ! It wasn't to say that Hiccup didn't want their friendship but the truth was that he didn't need it, not like he had before. He had other friends now, ones who valued him for who he was.

"Your dad's looking for you by the way," Astrid shot off angrily, already leaving the Cove.

Hiccup froze, turning to stare at her, eyes wide. Unless he had done something wrong, he never thought he would hear those words together. Not once, in all the years he had snuck out of the village and spent the day with dragons, not once had he returned back to find someone had been looking for him. He had been careful, never leaving after one of his typical mistakes, sure that someone would find him to reprimand him for his actions. He had always returned after any raids he missed (which weren't many), knowing that his dad would most likely check to make sure he was still standing and hadn't burned down the village. When work in the forge was piling up he stayed close, knowing that Gobber might need his help. It was instinctual now, a ritual he performed each time he left Berk to ensure that he wouldn't be missed â€“ see where his dad was, look in on the forge, avoid being seen.

He had been so caught up in his plan to kill the Red Death that he hadn't bothered to make sure he wouldn't be missed, certain of his reputation. Hiccup shook himself mentally, stopping Astrid with his words. "Did he say why?" he asked, trying not to let the worry seep into his voice. Why hadn't Astrid told him right away? Why had she wasted so much time?

Astrid paused to look back at him â€“ clearly the worry wasn't as well hidden as he would have liked. "It's no big deal," she said easily, some of the anger leaving her tone in favor of surprise at his worry, "he just said Gobber wanted to make some more weapons, you know, because of the Outcasts." She paused, realization coming to her. "Who aren't here, are they?"

The blacksmith's apprentice shook his head distractedly, caught up in his own thoughts. 'Just Gobber in the forge â€“ I can handle that'. It wasn't like they had noticed him missing before, hopefully one quick excuse and all would be forgotten, he just had to make sure it didn't happen again. "Right, thanks," he finally replied, giving the two teen Vikings a quick smile before he raced out of the Cove.

"Good luck!" Fishlegs shouted, clearly following behind him â€“ though not as quickly.

"\_Thanks!\_" In his haste, Hiccup didn't notice that he had spoken Dragonese, nor did he notice Fishlegs and Astrid exchange looks just outside the cove.

A silent glance between the two conspirators and then Astrid was off, following behind Hiccup to make sure that he didn't get himself into any trouble.

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup found his father easily enough â€“ though surprisingly the large chief was sometimes very difficult to locate, called all over the village for his duties. Stoick was standing outside of the forge, talking with Gobber when Hiccup arrived, skidding to a halt in front of his father.</p>

The men turned to him in surprise and Hiccup quickly spoke up. "Astrid said you were looking for me?" he said breathlessly, his statement coming out as a question due to his surprise. Seriously, when did anyone ever look for him?

Stoick frowned, nodding. "Where have you been son?" he asked, looking Hiccup up and down as Gobber did the same.

Cursing mentally as Stoick's eyes came to a halt on his bloody leg, Hiccup scrambled to come up with an excuse. "I was in the woods," he responded, sticking as close to the truth as he could without risking banishment. "Scraped my leg on a rock."

Astrid arrived just as Stoick's frown deepened. "The woods aren't safe Hiccup," he began to scold the dragon rider.

But Hiccup was done pretending. "I came in second in dragon training Dad," he interrupted, "I think I can handle a few trees."

Finally, Stoick's frown disappeared, a smile appearing in its place as he remembered his son's accomplishments. Sufficiently distracted, the chief turned to Astrid. "About that," he began, "no one managed to capture a dragon during the last raid."

It was Astrid's turn to interrupt. "Don't worry about it sir," she said quickly, sending a brief panicked glance as Hiccup before continuing. It was clear she didn't have as much practice keeping secrets as he did. "I'll prove myself in the next raid."

Stoick nodded in agreement; obviously Astrid was everything a Viking was supposed to be.

Tension dissipated, Gobber spoke for the first time. "Now that that's settled, it's time to get working," he said easily, gesturing toward the forge. "Gotta be ready if the Outcasts come back."

Everything seemed to be going well, Stoick was leaving, Astrid following him with only a glance back at Hiccup, and Hiccup himself was heading into the forge with Gobber when a loud screech filled the air. Hiccup recognized it immediately as the warning cry of a Terrible Terror â€“ basically shouting out an "\_Incoming!\_" â€“ and everyone's eyes turned to the sky.

The small dragon was flying quickly for the forge and it didn't take

Hiccup long to realize that Strangler was coming far sooner than he had expected.

Knowing that the dragons from the arena (and the injured Nadder from the raid) didn't have a part in his plan, Hiccup had hastily concocted something for them to do. Together they had formed a chain, a relay race of sorts, from the nest to Berk. If something happened at the nest, news that Hiccup would want to know, they were to pass the message on, ending with Strangler, who would relay the news to Hiccup.

Something was happening at the nest but as the Vikings around him began to cry out Hiccup could only hope that the news didn't cost his new friend his life.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: You know by now I stink at updating, so thanks again for all your patience. Everyone seems to be loving it and I've reached 120 reviews already - and twice that many follows. I never expected this kind of response so again, thank you.</strong>

\*\*Next chapter has already been slightly outlined, so hopefully you won't have to deal with this cliffhanger for too long. \*\*

\*\*Thanks once again for being awesome, let me know what you liked, and, even better, what you didn't like.\*\*

## 10. In Action

Hiccup tensed anxiously as Strangler descended, trying to notice what each and every Viking was doing. Stoick had paused in his departure, slinging a small knife into the sky, and Hiccup watched unhappily as Strangler barely managed to dodge it. In a matter of moments the small dragon landed on his shoulder and the eyes of the Vikings were upon him.

Hiccup knew that, whatever happened now, he wouldn't be able to keep his secret any longer. He had to protect Strangler and he had to know what the dragon intended to say. It had to be important if the Terror had risked so much to find him.

Around him the Vikings slowly crept closer, shouting meaningless platitudes and cautioning him to remain still. Hiccup ignored them. He knew that they wouldn't attack, not with Strangler draped over his shoulders as he was. Vikings were dragon killers but they weren't about to hurt Hiccup. The teenager knew, however, that what he did next might change all that.

'Be brief,' he growled quietly, knowing that some of the Vikings surrounding him would have heard.

Eyes whirling furiously, aware of the danger he was in, Strangler did as Hiccup asked. 'She's losing control,' he said quickly, not needing to clarify. 'Hundreds are fleeing. Some come for you.'

Hiccup nodded, mind rapidly running through scenarios, and was incredibly grateful that Strangler had come, no matter the

consequences — this was important news.

A Viking inched closer to him, bringing his attention back to those around him, and Hiccup was willing to bet that it was only because Strangler's teeth were so close to his neck that he hadn't been tackled yet. Still, they seemed to be giving him odd glances, having no doubt heard his growls. Hiccup moved slowly, pulling Strangler from his shoulders as though he meant to kill the dragon himself. The Vikings around him relaxed, clearly intending to let him, and Hiccup took the opportunity for what it was.

'\_Be swift,\_' he growled, knowing that would be enough of a warning, and flung the Terror into the air.

There were shouts of surprise all around him and Hiccup immediately pulled his dagger from his belt as Strangler flapped frantically. Let them think he intended to kill his friend in mid-air. Hopefully, given that he was the son of the chief, they would stand back and allow him what they thought would be his first kill. There was a pause as Hiccup fingered his dagger and nobody moved.

As Hiccup hesitated however, the Vikings grew restless as Strangler got farther and farther away. Stoick, not understanding his son's reluctance to throw, was the first to move. He grabbed a dagger from a nearby Viking, having thrown his earlier, and hurled it with frightening accuracy at the tiny green dragon. It was then that Hiccup made his move.

Reacting with lightning speed, Hiccup threw his dagger, praying to Odin, Thor, and all the gods that it would meet its mark. And, with a harsh clang of metal, Hiccup's dagger collided with Stoick's, bringing them both to the ground. Strangler flew safely out of range.

The shocked Vikings turned their eyes on him and Hiccup knew his life had changed forever.

\* \* \*

><p>For what seemed like eternity, nobody moved. Hiccup stood there with all eyes on him, not meeting any of the gazes, and wondered if he should just run now, before anyone could do anything about it. But running was cowardly and Hiccup still held out a slim hope that he would be able to explain himself. There was no way that his actions could be mistaken for anything other than what they were, he knew that. His accuracy was as good as his father's, able to hit a small moving target in mid-air. It hadn't been an accident and no amount of lying could turn it into one.</p>

Slowly, unsure of how to react, the Vikings turned to their chief. Stoick was stationary; the expression on his face unreadable, but Hiccup saw the anger behind his eyes.

"What, was \_that\_?" Stoick finally asked slowly, in a low dangerous voice. Clearly he too hoped that an explanation would solve everything.

But Hiccup couldn't lie. "The knife slipped" wouldn't be an acceptable excuse. He squared his shoulders. "He wasn't hurting anyone Dad," he said strongly, allowing his voice to carry to all the

Vikings present.

Stoick almost took a step back in surprise. "Wasn't hurting anyone?" he growled angrily, voice rising. "It was a dragon!"

"And dragons aren't what we think they are!" Hiccup protested. He had to get out of there. Aside from worrying what the Vikings would do to him, Strangler had told him that the Queen would be sending dragons after him specifically. Even after everything, he didn't want to put Berk in danger. This was where he had grown up and there were people that he cared about here, even if he no longer called it home or if they didn't feel the same way. "We don't have to kill them!"

There was a stunned silence at his words and Hiccup could already hear the whispers of "traitor" floating through the mob.

"Leave us." Stoick's words were low and dangerous, his eyes boring into Hiccup, and the Vikings surrounding him murmured in surprise. "Leave us!"

The Vikings dispersed as Hiccup stood resolutely in place. He caught a glimpse of Astrid's worried face as she left before Stoick grabbed a hold of his arm. It was painful, and Hiccup struggled a bit, but his wiry strength was no match for his father's brute force.

"Dad listen to me," he tried to reason. "There's so much more going on than you know."

Stoick didn't pause, dragging him off to the Great Hall where they could speak in silence. Hiccup was thrown to the ground as Stoick paced and quickly scrambled upward, ignoring the pain as he landed on his wounded leg. It was hard to believe that the injury had been obtained mere hours ago.

"I should have known. I should have seen the signs," Stoick muttered to himself.

Hiccup tried to approach him. "Dad, listen—"

"We had a deal!" Stoick roared at him, pausing to say something before stopping short. He went back to pacing.

"A deal you forced me into!" Hiccup countered, done with everything being blamed on him. "I know how to fight dragons Dad, I'm just not going to kill them."

"So everything in the ring. A trick? A lie?" The chief stomped toward Hiccup, struggling with his words. Before Hiccup could answer Stoick turned to him, eyes narrowed. "The dragons all escaped." It wasn't a question.

Hiccup didn't know what to say. "They're not our enemies Dad!" It was as good as a confession.

His father took another step forward. "There are no Outcasts, are there?" His voice was low and dangerous again.

Now he'd done it. On top of defending a dragon, freeing the dragons, and basically betraying the values of Vikings, Hiccup had wasted valuable village resources on a threat that didn't exist. There would

be no getting out of this. Hopefully Stoick would leave soon though, affording Hiccup the opportunity to escape and get Berk out of danger. Hiccup shook his head.

Stoick stared at him. "You've thrown your lot in with them," he stated accusingly. "You're not a Viking." He paused. "You're not my son." The chief made to leave, ignoring Hiccup's devastation, and paused once more. "Your trial will be in an hour."

And then the door was shut behind him, leaving Hiccup alone in the dark. But, as Hiccup reminded himself, he wasn't alone, and no matter what inner turmoil he was facing now, Stoick had just afforded him the opportunity he needed. He already knew the outcome of the "trial" anyway. Banishment was rare in Berk, but for someone who defended dragons, who betrayed Viking values so easily? Well, Hiccup knew what was coming for him. There was no point sitting around waiting for it. As for his other words... Hiccup would think about that later. When he didn't feel like crying at the thought.

\* \* \*

><p>The dragon rider didn't wait long after his father had left to make his own way out. Sneaking out of the village was harder this time, the paths and alleyways filled with gossiping Vikings, but Hiccup was an expert in stealth. He made it to the woods easily enough, racing down the familiar hidden trails to safety.</p>

He had stopped running by the time he got to the Cove but he was still short of breath, and in a hurry. He slipped quickly into the entrance, mind racing with all that had occurred (he had had plenty of time to think on the way), and paused as he glanced around. His eyes found Toothless first and a great wave of relief swept over the young rider as he realized his friend was safe. Much calmer, Hiccup continued scanning the Cove; first Meatlug, then the Zippleback, the Nightmare, the two Nadders, and finally Strangler. They were all safe.

Hiccup took a deep breath, allowing himself to grin. He didn't know why he had been so worried — there was no reason to believe that the Vikings had discovered the Cove — but he nevertheless felt as though a burden had been lifted from his shoulders. 'They're all safe,' he repeated to himself.

Now it was time to act.

Taking a few moments for himself, Hiccup took a few deep breaths. First, he made sure that all the dragons were aware of the situation, and knew what Strangler had already told him. Once everyone had the full picture, and was assured of each other's safety, they gathered around to discuss the problem.

The way Hiccup saw it, they had four problems: first that dragons were fleeing from the Red Death, they would be hungry and confused and need a place to go; second was that the Red Death hadn't lost control of all the dragons yet, and some of the ones still in her influence would be going after Hiccup and Toothless; third, he couldn't stay on Berk; and fourth, and it was only really a problem for Hiccup, some of the freed dragons would likely head in the direction of Berk.

Hiccup couldn't be in three places at once and even if he and Toothless split it wouldn't accomplish anything. Not that they even considered it.

'\_I can take care of the free dragons,\_' Ripwing offered.

The rider looked toward his friend. Ripwing lived on a fairly large island â€“ still with his parents, though he wouldn't for much longer â€“ and it was just out of the Red Death's range of control. The dragons would be safe there and it was a good resting point anyway.

He nodded in agreement, exchanging glances with Toothless.

'\_Alright,\_' he agreed, '\_two dragons with one axe. We'll pack up here and head to Timberjack Island. Once there, you guys can set up a base for the coming dragons.\_' He gestured toward all the dragons but Toothless. That would get him out of Berk as well as take care of the freed dragons.

The Nadder Astrid had flown cocked her head at him. '\_And what will you be doing?\_'

Hiccup and Toothless exchanged glances again, speaking in silence, and Hiccup grinned up at his friends. '\_We've got a horde of dragons coming for us. We thought they might be up to a chase.\_' He didn't say that he was going to try and keep dragons away from Berk at the same time, knowing that he was taking a chance to even get them to agree to his current plan.

The dragons seemed worried but they knew perfectly well that Toothless was the fastest of them all. Besides, both dragon and his rider were known for their stubbornness, they wouldn't be persuaded otherwise.

Problems solved, even if the solutions weren't perhaps the best, Hiccup went back into action. He wouldn't be taking the lean-to with him, or even dismantling the makeshift hut, but he didn't want to leave his things behind. With Strangler following him inside, Hiccup began to pack, wondering on the fact that he couldn't think of a single thing from his room in Berk that he would regret leaving behind. He truly had left his Viking lifestyle a long time ago, even if he was only just realizing it now. He had never really been a Viking, he had known that, but he had never thought about how little he relied on Berk to get by. Every time he left he had returned to Berk for the people and so that he wouldn't be punished, not because he really had to. It was a chilling thought that he had become so independent without anyone noticing, but not an unhappy one.

Even nowâ€¦ Well, he still didn't want to think on his dad's words. About his disownment. Because his dad \_was\_ someone who mattered to him and to have been so thoroughly rejectedâ€¦

The banishment wasn't a surprise though. Hiccup had been thinking about it for weeks. He had known that when the truth was revealed he wouldn't be able to stay in Berk, though he had hoped otherwise.

'What's done is done,' he thought to himself as he threw another journal into a saddlebag. He wouldn't be leaving, not entirely, but he wouldn't be staying.

Exiting the lean-to, Hiccup began to place the saddlebags on Toothless when he heard rustling from behind him. The dragons had already noticed it, waiting silently for him, and they sniffed the air cautiously as Hiccup tensed. He wouldn't have thought that the Vikings would have found him yet but it didn't hurt to be careful.

'\_Friends,\_' the Zippleback heads growled together as Meatlug began to move forward.

Toothless silently nodded his agreement â€“ no unknown Vikings were coming â€“ and Hiccup relaxed, wishing he had had his knife. Digging a new one from a nearby saddlebag the exile turned to greet his human friends.

Entering the Cove was Fishlegs â€“ who was promptly bowled over by Meatlug in greeting â€“ and Astrid â€“ who the Nadder chirped hesitantly at. Both looked worried and seemed to have run at least part of the way.

"Hiccup, what are you doing?" Astrid asked before he could open his mouth. "You missed your trial!"

Hiccup failed to hold back a snort. "I already knew the outcome," he pointed out, "long before the trial began. It wasn't going to be anything but banishment."

"Yeah, butâ€¦" Astrid faltered and Hiccup's suspicions were confirmed.

'Yep,' he thought, 'definitely exile.' His father had been well within his rights as chief to hold the trial without him. They thought they had decided his fate for him. Nobody human knew that he had chosen it himself, seven years ago when he had saved a young dragon's life.

"You didn't even defend yourself!" Astrid protested, as though that would have changed anything.

"I saved a dragon. I practically told my dad that I freed the arena dragons. They wouldn't have listened." He didn't have time for this. He didn't want to think about Berk, and the people there that had rejected him.

Fishlegs was surprisingly the one to respond. "I did," he spoke confidently, but with sorrow underlying his tone. He knew that however much he had trusted Hiccup, the Berkians wouldn't feel the same.

Meeting Fishlegs' eyes, Hiccup smiled sadly. "I don't have a lot of time," he told them calmly, not trying to rush them but merely stating fact, holding back his frustration with the situation. "But if you want, I could meet you here, two nights from now. Everything should have settled down by then." Perhaps he wasn't ready to cut all ties with Berk. But Fishlegs had been kind to him in the past, and they had believed him in the present. Everyone deserved a second chance.

Fishlegs and Astrid paused, taking in a moment to look around the

cove. They noticed the saddlebags on Toothless and the tenseness of the dragons ready to fly.

"Hiccup, what's going on?" Astrid asked again.

Well, now more than ever was the time to be truthful. He was done telling lies and hiding things from the humans around him. As much as his emotions were in turmoil, as much as he couldn't stand to think about what his father had done, some part of him felt free. He wasn't pretending to be a Viking anymore. He was Hiccup. He was a dragon rider. And he would fight for what he believed in, regardless of what others thought.

"The poison didn't kill the Red Death," he told the Vikings, "but it did make her angry. A lot of the dragons are free and in need of help."

"Let us help," Astrid said, exchanging glances with Fishlegs who nodded in agreement. "You said no last time but, Hiccup, Berk is our village too."

Hiccup held back a wince. "It's not my village anymore," he reminded them, not allowing them to protest. "And it's dangerous, neither of you have a lot of experience flying."

"Life is dangerous," Astrid countered.

"I doubt we're any safer here," Fishlegs added.

It was true that if Hiccup didn't succeed that there was a good chance that Berk would be attacked, but being in the air was still more dangerous. He looked between his two human friends. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked again. They were free to make their own choices and he couldn't say that their help wouldn't be useful. Besides, he really didn't have time for this.

Fishlegs and Astrid nodded solemnly.

Finally, Hiccup gave in, pausing momentarily to consider the strengths and weaknesses of their dragons. As he did so, he shifted the saddlebags from Toothless to Ripwing. "Alright, Fishlegs, you go with them," Hiccup instructed when he was done, pointing to Strangler, Ripwing, and the unnamed dragons. "There's an island not far from here, Meatlug knows the way. Any dragons that escape and need help will probably land there. Can you help them?"

Fishlegs nodded again, uncertainty in his eyes but confidence in his movements. He slipped onto Meatlug's back, sent one last glance toward Hiccup, and then took off, a flock of dragons behind him.

That left Hiccup and Toothless with Astrid and her Nadder. Hiccup turned to the Viking next. "That leaves you to protect Berk."

Astrid turned a confused eye toward him. "What?"

"Hundreds of dragons are escaping," Hiccup explained. "They're scared and hungry. You don't need to attack them, just keep them away. All you need to do is circle above Berk and shoot fire if they get too close."

Each of them mounted their respective dragons and Astrid nodded before glancing up at the sky, a worried frown on her face. "It looks like a storm."

Hiccup followed her gaze, shrugging. "It was bound to snow eventually. I'm sure you can handle it."

Before he could take off Astrid stopped him yet again, finally catching onto his wording. "Wait, what are you going to do?"

"We're the Red Death's number one enemy," Hiccup responded, raising an eyebrow. "No matter how distracted she is, she's going to send dragons after us. Toothless and I need to lead them away from here." Beneath him the Night Fury rumbled his agreement.

Astrid only looked at him worriedly. "Butâ€¦"

Hiccup cut her off, not willing to listen to her concern. He was having a bad day (understatement of the century, despite all that had gone right in the morning) and simply didn't have the time. "Astrid, I'm just asking you to do what you've always done: protect Berk and let me worry about myself." And with those words Hiccup nudged Toothless into flight, leaving Astrid to fly off into the coming storm by herself.

\* \* \*

><p>Snow had begun to fall by the time Hiccup and Toothless reached the mist but they paid it no mind. The low visibility would hardly hinder them. Still, Toothless' wing was bruised and the less flying they had to do the safer they would be. Going only so far into the mist as to approach the sea stacks, Toothless landed on the first one, prepared to wait for the inevitable fight that was to come.</p>

They waited in silence, both of them nervous but prepared, and soon enough the sound of wing beats could be heard. Listening and watching closely, Hiccup and Toothless quickly determined which dragons, and how many, were after them. Four Nightmares and four Nadders. Two â€¦ no make that three Zippelbacks. Surprisingly a Whispering Death and two Gronckles. Fourteen dragons against the two of them, and more were sure to come.

'\_You ready bud?\_' Hiccup asked his best friend, leaning over the dragon's neck.

'\_Always\_,'\_ Toothless growled in agreement, tensing his muscles as he prepared to launch himself into the sky.

Following a silent countdown that only the two friends could hear, Toothless waited until he could see all fourteen dragons before taking off. He dove as soon as he left his perch, making his way into the sea stacks. Maneuverability and speed would be their friends.

Some of the approaching dragons fell behind instantly, blinded by the snow and the mists and the coming night and unable to avoid the towers of rock that loomed from the darkness. The Whispering Death had halted right away, unable to turn as quickly as the others,

followed by a Nightmare, a Gronckle, and two Zippiebacks. Not to mention that Hiccup was willing to bet that the screech that echoed behind them was a Nadder crashing into a sea stack. Six down, eight to go.

Leaning together to dodge the scorching heat of a Nadder's blast, Hiccup and Toothless turned, flying into a particularly narrow gap between two stacks. The Nadder followed easily but the Nightmare behind it was not so lucky, screeching in anger and pain when it didn't manage to stop in time. With no time to celebrate the victory, Hiccup and Toothless executed a loop in mid-air, ending just above the Nadder that was catching up to them. Bearing down on it, one quick shove from Toothless was enough to send the Nadder careening into a nearby sea stack. Eight down, six to go.

A follow up attack came in the form of a Nightmare, one who had been clever enough to fly above the sea stacks rather than through them. Toothless dove as Hiccup ducked, each of them avoiding the fiery maw that snapped shut on thin air, but they weren't quick enough to avoid the talons that followed. One claw managed to scrape across Hiccup's back, tearing open his vest and leaving him with a long shallow scratch. The rider held back a cry of pain at the attack, quickly determining that the wound wasn't serious.

They twisted to the side, Toothless pushing through the pain of his bruised wing as he flew even faster. Slowly they pulled ahead, weaving through the stacks, but they knew they couldn't keep it up for much longer. Toothless' wings were tiring and in the cold air Hiccup was losing his grip.

As a silent signal, Hiccup placed his hand calmly on Toothless, mid-flight, letting his best friend know that it was okay to slow down. Leveling out, Toothless allowed himself to glide out of the sea stacks, out of the mist but into the darkness that had fallen while they were busy dodging dragons. Hiccup twisted around in his seat, giving the Night Fury a moment of rest, and tried to make out how many dragons were behind them.

The Gronckles had both fallen behind. The Nadder and the Nightmare that had crashed were nowhere to be seen. The two Zippiebacks and the Nightmare that had hesitated at the beginning were also out of sight. The third Zippieback and another Nightmare had slowed down recently. But the Whispering Death had caught up, flying over the stacks, not really needing the best vision thanks to its habit of living underground. Three Nadders were still on their tail. And the Nightmare that had injured Hiccup wasn't far behind.

'Nine down, five to go,' Hiccup thought, leaning forward to give Toothless speed.

After a long moment of gliding one of the Nadders finally surged forward, giving Hiccup and Toothless the opportunity they had been looking for. The Night Fury rolled, staying mainly in place, and shoved out at the Nadder with his claws. Thanks to Toothless' positioning, it crashed into the Nadder behind it, sending both of them careening backward as they screamed and scratched at each other.

Quickly turning, Toothless followed up his kick with a bolt of lightning at the Whispering Death, which it didn't manage to avoid.

Hiccup stood, ignoring the pain in his leg and back, and dove for the third Nadder as Toothless tackled the Nightmare.

He landed on the Nadder's wing, causing it to stagger in its flight as he scrambled onto its back. As the Nadder fell slightly, Hiccup waited, allowing it to regain its momentum. Once it was above Toothless he kicked out, hitting the wing he had already injured. This time it shrieked out, falling quickly, and Hiccup took the opportunity to jump off. Catching sight of the Nadder, barely managing to glide before it hit the sea, Hiccup knew it wouldn't be back. He landed on Toothless, prepared to settle into the saddle, but the Night Fury was still struggling with the Nightmare.

Without warning, the enemy dragon's tail smashed into Hiccup, sending him toward the sea that the Nadder had just managed to avoid.

There was no way Toothless would be able to catch him in time, his dragon now battling a Nadder as well as the Nightmare. Hiccup got ready to hit the water, and prepared himself for the cold that would fill him and the salt that would sting his wounds.

This wouldn't be pleasant.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Long wait than I expected, sorry. The scene with Stoick was hard to write, I got caught up in vacation, and then I still had a couple thousand words to go. Hopefully it turned out alright.<strong>

\*\*If you didn't like the father-son confrontation, sorry again. All I can say is that Hiccup will run into Stoick again.\*\*

\*\*Anyway, thanks for all the amazing reviews and the many follows and favorites. I'm blown away by the response to this story.\*\*

\*\*(Oh, and, sorry about the cliffhanger!)\*\*

## 11. Contemplations

Hiccup had enough time to remind himself not to breathe in as he fell. It was the only thing he remembered.

He hit the water hard, the force of gravity and the height of his fall forcing him under, and the impact and shock of the cold water drove the air from his lungs. Exhaling sharply, but having enough strength of mind to clamp his mouth quickly shut, Hiccup struggled under the freezing sea. The cold seeped into his bones, making him feel like he was burning cold, and the salt seeped into his wounds, adding a different kind of burn to his back and his leg. The impact from hitting the water only helped to make him ache all over.

As it was, Hiccup was lucky he had oriented himself properly in the tumultuous water, breaking the surface shortly after he had been submerged for a much needed breath of air. Gasping as much oxygen as he could, the dragon rider's break was short lived as the rocky waves, his aching body, and the cold currents forced him under once more.

This time he was quicker to right himself, gasping for another breath. 'Swim,' he told himself, his mind a jumble of pain and confusion. 'I need to swim.' He couldn't remember why his need was so urgent. His body did as he commanded it though, managing to keep his head above the waves even as numbness spread through him, his body adjusting to the cold.

Some part of him knew he wasn't adjusting; it was too cold for that. This wasn't simply getting used to the temperature, his body was shutting down. He needed to get out of the water. But why was he in the water in the first place? Where was he? He had left Berk withâ€| with Toothless. Toothless!

Struggling to glance upward, Hiccup recognized his dragon's shriek as he let loose the lightening within him. Everything rushed back to him, the flowers, his father, and the subsequent battle. A second shriek echoed the first, pulling him back to the present, and Hiccup could see just enough to recognize the Nightmare's cry as it fled. A dark shape dove â€“ Toothless coming for him â€“ but Hiccup could feel himself being lifted out of the water even as he kept Toothless in view.

One of the Nadders was still around, lifting him out of the water â€“ a prize for the Red Death to kill herself. The Whispering Death had recovered from Toothless' earlier shot as well, attacking the Night Fury to cover for the Nadder.

Hiccup watched through a haze as the shadowy form of his friend battled the slender dragon, slowly getting smaller as the Nadder flew away. He ached all over; he could barely feel his feet or hands, and his leg and back were killing him. Not to mention that the Nadder was holding him quite uncomfortably by his upper arms, his shoulders aching in their sockets. But he had to do something. He wasn't going to die here. Not now.

Fumbling with his numb fingers â€“ how long had he been in the water anyway? It was impossible to tell â€“ Hiccup reached around until he got a better grip on the Nadder's legs. He knew dragons. He knew Nadders. He could do this. Reaching around with one hand he ran a finger lightly down the back of one of the legs, a sort of ticklish spot for Nadders. Sure enough the dragon released its claws and growled loudly, dropping one arm and allowing Hiccup to adjust his grip on the other leg.

No longer trapped by the dragon's claws, the dragon rider considered his options. He had seconds before the Nadder reacted badly. He could jump off â€“ risk the icy water again and hope that Toothless got to him before the Nadder. Or he could try to climb the dragon, and hold it off until Toothless got there. The second option seemed to have a better chance of survival so, as the Nadder adjusted its legs, trying to dislodge him, he jumped, fumbling for a grip on the outstretched wing.

His weight pulled the Nadder downward momentarily, but that only afforded him the ability to climb up, making his way onto the dragon's back. Now he just had to stay there.

Clinging to the Nadder's neck, Hiccup tried to get the enemy dragon to turn around, to make things easier for Toothless to find him, but he couldn't quite manage it. Toothless was managing on his own just

fine though, with only one dragon left to handle, and quickly raced after the Nadder.

Seeing his dragon coming, Hiccup lost his death grip on the Nadder's neck. If it had been any other situation, any other dragon, Hiccup would have hesitated. But this was Toothless. He jumped again, plummeting once more toward the frozen sea, and landed comfortably on the Night Fury's back. With a burst of speed they were gone, racing through the stacks briefly as they lost the last dragon behind them.

There was no time for celebration though. Caught up in the fight earlier, Hiccup had ignored the strong wind and the falling snow. Now, no longer dripping wet as the water on him began to freeze, it was all he could think about it. His mind was muddled with pain and numbness and, as he hunkered down on Toothless, he realized that he had been shaking for some time.

Hiccup wasn't an idiot. He lived in Berk; he knew the dangers of the cold weather, and in being wet when out during winter. He needed to find shelter. Now.

Thankfully Toothless was in tune with his rider's needs, and was in need of shelter himself. He made his way as quickly as he could to the island where Fishlegs was waiting, hordes of dragons milling about in the darkness, and landed near the fire that the young Viking had started.

"Hiccup!"

The boy in question frowned, shaking his head as he stumbled off the back of his friend. He could have sworn he had heard his name. But dragons didn't speak Norse.

"Hiccup!"

Strong hands gripped him tightly, dragging him towards the fire, and Hiccup blinked up at the larger teenager. "Fishlegs?" he tried to say.

Fishlegs didn't get a chance to respond. Before either of the humans could react, Toothless had grabbed his wayward human, tugging him against his stomach and curling around the freezing teen. Hiccup relaxed immediately, soaking in the warmth that emanated from the black dragon, and let his body finally drift off into unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

><p>When Hiccup woke it was to darkness, a curtain of black surrounding him on all sides. It took him a moment to realize that the source of the darkness was also the source of the heat behind him. He was wrapped up in Toothless' embrace. A quick knock on the wing in front of him was all it took to alert the dragon that he was awake. Toothless quickly shifted and Hiccup had to shut his eyes and blink rapidly at the blinding light.</p>

The sun was high in the sky, all clouds from the previous days' storm long gone, and a coating of snow reflected the light back upward. Quite a few dragons were still lounging in the snow, tracks

everywhere, while others flew high overhead. Thankfully it was dry where he was, a fire still burning in front of him.

The snow, the dragons, Toothless, even the fire â€“ these weren't all that unexpected. The two people tending to the fire on the other handâ€ Well, Hiccup had to blink a few times to make sure he wasn't imagining things.

Forcing his sore body to sit up, Hiccup quickly held back a wince at the pain as dragons began to surround him. Toothless was at his back, Strangler peeking over the Night Fury worriedly. Ripwing had bounded forward the moment Toothless had shifted, staring down at the rider. The dragons from the arena had all perked up, shifting in front of the fire to study him. And behind all the dragons, standing by the fire, were Astrid and Fishlegs, trying to anxiously see through the dragons that surrounded him.

Hiccup blinked again, grateful for everyone's silence. He wasn't sure he could take all the growls and roars at the moment. "\_Is everyone all right?" he asked instead, glancing around anxiously. He felt quite small, sitting on the ground as he was, but he also didn't feel like moving at the moment.

There were growls of assent from all around him. A few voices asked how he was doing, Ripwing the loudest among them, and Hiccup finally figured he should take stock of his own injuries. His leg ached slightly, pain was emanating from his back, his throat felt scratched up (from swallowing water?), and he was sore all over. It was then that he realized that not all the blood covering him was his.

Twisting carefully, so as not to aggravate his injuries, Hiccup turned to meet the eyes of his best friend. "\_Fine,\_ he responded, absentmindedly. "\_You?\_"

There were scratches on Toothless' belly, three long lines that were already healing, and Hiccup labeled them as the cause of the Night Fury blood that covered him. He also knew that Toothless' wing would still be bruised from the earlier battle, but he wasn't in the position to search out other injuries, leaning against his dragon as he was.

"\_Scratched belly, bruised wing, sore tail,\_ Toothless said quickly, staring at Hiccup expectantly.

He and the Night Fury had come to an agreement quite some time ago, because fine didn't always mean fine when it came to Hiccup.

"\_Scratched back, sore throat, and stiff leg,\_ Hiccup replied, knowing exactly what was expected of him. Toothless would tell him his injuries in exchange for learning about Hiccup's, they would tend to each other's wounds, and then neither of them would mention it again. Things worked best that way, when they weren't nagging each other to stay out of dangerous situations or take it easy for a while. They trusted each other to know their own limits, and they trusted themselves to watch over the other when necessary.

Around him, the dragons relaxed slightly as Hiccup admitted to his non-life threatening injuries. All would be okay.

Toothless himself let out a huff of relief, shifting slightly to help Hiccup stand. With one hand on his faithful friend, the two of them limping along together, Hiccup slowly made his way through the crowd of dragons that had gathered. He checked on their health, reassuring them of his and Toothless' own status. He answered their questions about the queen, and described what had happened to the group as a whole. He asked his own questions, gathering information from the dragons that had fled. All the dragons from the Cove were safe. Ripwing told him where his stuff had been set down. Dragons newly freed from the queen were eager to thank him.

But eventually, Hiccup found himself standing before Fishlegs and Astrid, and the Gronckle and Nadder who rested beside them. The three teens stared at each other for a long moment. Exhausted from holding court and the previous day's events, Hiccup didn't know what to say.

"You're really good at that."

Hiccup blinked, turning to Fishlegs, who had spoken. "What?" he asked, not quite understanding his friend's words.

"Being a leader," Fishlegs clarified, eyes moving over the horde of dragons that stood behind the dragon and rider. "You're really good at it."

Hiccup himself turned, finally taking in just how many dragons had been hounding him for answers. He rarely thought of himself as a leader, but Fishlegs was right. He had been moving among his, well, not his people exactly, but that's what they were. Hiccup had been soothing their fears, reassuring them to sweep away their doubts â€“ the dragons looked to him for guidance.

"Thanks," he managed to respond, somewhat self-conscious.

Fishlegs smiled slightly and silence fell again. Hiccup moved his gaze to Astrid, who was looking at him as though seeing him for the first time.

"How's Berk?" he asked, remembering the task he had set her. Glancing over her and her dragon, neither of them seemed injured, but that didn't mean that Berk hadn't suffered any tragedies.

Much like Hiccup had, Astrid blinked, refocusing her gaze. "Berk is safe," she replied confidently. "Stormfly and I managed to hold off all the dragons that approached."

Hiccup grinned at the hidden meaning to her words.  
"Stormfly?"

Reaching up to pat the Nadder, Astrid blushed slightly in return, also grinning. "The snow fell pretty hard last night."

The battle seemed to have allowed the two to bond, finally trusting each other, and Hiccup was glad to hear it. One thing still puzzled him though. "Why are you guys here?" he paused, realizing that he sounded far less grateful than he was. "I mean, won't people be wondering where you are?" He pushed down all thoughts that said no one would care where he was. The people, the dragons, who cared

were all with him now.

"We can miss one day," Astrid replied, shrugging. "Besides youâ€!" she trailed off, clearly uncertain.

"You were injured," Fishlegs continued for her, glancing nervously at Toothless. "But Toothless, uh, he wouldn't let anyone see you." The Viking sound both admiring and disappointed, as though he had wanted to tend to Hiccup himself but had understood and respected Toothless' decision to not let them near.

Hiccup understood as well. He appreciated Fishlegs and Astrid's friendship, but he still expected them to get bored at any moment, to leave him behind and forget about the outcast who spoke with dragons. But if he had seen someone injured? Well he wouldn't have been able to leave without seeming them for himself either.

He didn't know what to say to the Viking though, so he merely nodded, looking around for a pile of the saddlebags Ripwing had carried for him. The Timberjack had reported that he and Fishlegs had unloaded them and Hiccup quickly located them stacked neatly by the fire.

"I've got some bandages in those," he said, pointing, before glancing back at the two Vikings. They didn't look hurt but just to be sureâ€! "Are either of you two injured?"

They both shook their heads and Fishlegs hesitated as he approached the many saddlebags. "Iâ€!" he looked back up at Hiccup. "I didn't exactly want to go through your stuff," he said apprehensively.

An emotion filled Hiccup, one that he associated with his first few years of hanging around dragons. He didn't have a name for it but it was definitely a good feeling. It came when Hiccup knew he was being respected. It was the feeling he got when he knew that others valued him, and accepted him for who he was.

Fishlegs had respected his privacy, had trusted that Toothless would look after Hiccup. It brought a faint smile to his face despite his exhaustion.

"It should be that bag," he said, pointing again, "the one with the mismatched thread." He had been experimenting with dyes that day.

Hurrying over with the bag, the two Vikings watched silently as Hiccup pulled out exactly what he needed with practiced ease. The dragons surrounding them began to disperse, returning to their previous activities, but a few remained, either watching Fishlegs and Astrid warily or peering worriedly at Hiccup and Toothless.

Hiccup ignored them all, turning to Toothless and tending to his wounds first. He sat down on the dry but frozen ground, waiting patiently as Toothless lay down beside him, rolling slightly to give the rider access to his wounds. Once the Night Fury had been tended to, he rolled up his pant leg and removed the bandages that had hastily been thrown on earlier. His leg was easy enough to handle, but when it came to his back he knew he couldn't do it himself. These situations were the worst, because as much as they both wanted it, Toothless couldn't help him. But Fishlegs and Astrid could. Hiccup turned reluctantly toward them.

"Could you?" he asked hesitantly, holding up the jar of salve in their direction.

Both of them moved at the same time, but Fishlegs was the one who stepped forward while Astrid only shifted slightly. The larger Viking took the jar from Hiccup and settled on the ground behind him, waiting while the rider removed his shirt.

Hiccup only hesitated for a brief second that time, knowing that there would be no hiding his scars. The scratch from the Bullrougher was practically healed, but that wasn't the only injury he had obtained over the years. Still, there was nothing he could do about it. He removed his shirt and turned his back to Fishlegs, handing him some bandages for once the wound had been treated.

Thankfully Fishlegs seemed to understand Hiccup reluctance and moved quickly but gently. The deed was done and Hiccup and Toothless could rest easy knowing that they were both healing as fast as they were capable.

The rider spent a bit more time going over information with the two humans, but he knew that they would need to return to Berk shortly. Promising to stay on the island and not strain himself, he sent Fishlegs and Astrid back to Berk on Meatlug and Stormfly. They arranged a meeting time and place — noon at the Cove in two days' time — and said their goodbyes.

Finally done with socializing, Hiccup leaned against his dragon and fell asleep once more.

\* \* \*

><p>When he woke again he finally felt well rested, even if he was still very sore, and he set to work on some sort of shelter. As warm and as comfortable as Toothless was, he couldn't rely on the Night Fury to protect him from the elements around the clock.</p>

He spent the hours before night fall slowly plodding around the clearing, directing the dragons who were eager to help him and organizing his belongings. He ended up staying up quite some time after the sun had set, his sleeping habits messed up by his injuries, but eventually went to sleep sheltered from the wind by a lean-to that he had managed to construct.

\* \* \*

><p>The next day passed slowly for the rider. Forced to remain stationary in order to let both himself and his dragon heal, Hiccup had nothing to do but think. Wandering away from the lean-to and fire pit, looking for a source of fresh water, Hiccup allowed himself to get lost in his own thoughts. He had been too caught up in the danger, in his fear for his friends, for Berk, and for himself. He hadn't had time to think about all that had occurred in one short day. But so much had happened.</p>

He couldn't go back to Berk. He had been banished, by the village. And not just banished, but disowned. For the first time, Hiccup allowed himself to think on the ramifications of his father's actions. He had been disowned. His place in Berk vanished for good — no more time at the forge, no laughing with Gobber, no moreâ€|

well, actually, there wasn't much in Berk Hiccup would miss. But his place in the Haddock family was gone too. He wasn't a Haddock anymore and he knew, however much they had disagreed, that he would miss his father most of all.

Struggling to hold back tears, Hiccup sank down in the snow and realized the pointlessness of his venture. What did they need water for with all the snow that was around? He put his face into his hands, his father's words replaying in his mind: "You're not a Viking. You're not my son."

It didn't seem real, that he could no longer return to his house in the village — because while it might not have been home, it had mattered to him. His father had raised him, had cared for him, had even tried to protect him in his own misguided way. But Stoick was merely Stoick now — no longer his father, just the chieftain of a village he was forbidden from entering.

Caught up in his own self-pity, Hiccup stiffened as he felt something bump into his back (lightly, ever mindful of his injuries). Before he had even looked up, the rider knew who had found him.

"You're supposed to be healing," he murmured, pulling his face from his hands.

Toothless growled lightly. They hadn't started criticizing each other's injuries yet, the unspoken agreement remaining, and they weren't about to start know.

"I know, I know," Hiccup chirped back, sufficiently chastised, despite his friend's lack of words. "It's just, all finally hitting me." He had already told Toothless what his father had done, but neither of them had had much time to think on it. "Berk was my home for so long, I can't just forget about that."

"Don't," Toothless replied easily, with the understanding that came from being friends for so long. He might have hated what Berk had done to Hiccup, but he also knew that he couldn't forget what Berk had done for Hiccup. It had given Hiccup to him after all. "You can't forget about the past, but you shouldn't live there either," he cautioned. Dragons as a species tended to live in the present, and it was that advice he gave to Hiccup. "Focus on now instead. Right now, we need to focus on getting better, then we can worry about what comes next."

Hiccup nodded, grateful for his friend's words. He stood, only wavering slightly, and rested a hand on his dragon. "Right, time to change your-" at a sharp look from Toothless he quickly corrected himself "I mean our bandages."

They headed back to the clearing together, limping side by side, and as the trees cleared the reveal their new home, Hiccup stopped to take it in. His lean-to was just left of the center, near the smoldering fire pit that Fishlegs and Astrid had arranged, and he wondered at their new found friendship. He had gone so long being ignored by the village that the attention that had been heaped on him recently felt so weird. But he hadn't been ignored by everyone.

His gaze moved to the dragons still there, the young ones frolicking in the snow, the older ones resting near the trees. The reason it

felt so weird, he realized, was because he the second half of his life he hadn't been ignored. The dragons had noticed him, had played with him, and respected his abilities.

Life in the village had gone from people disappointed to see him, criticizing his every move, to people ignoring him, not bothering to pay him any mind. He knew part of that was his own fault. He had been rather clumsy before he had met the dragons, he had made a lot of mistakes that wouldn't endear the village to him. And then, slowly, he had started leaving.

Spending more and more time in the Cove, none of the Vikings were witness to his mistakes anymore. They forgot about him as a trouble maker and started to think of him as a shadow â€“ often in the background but completely useless and unable to do anything. No one talked about shadows.

Finding Toothless had been the best thing that could ever have happened to him, but it meant that Hiccup didn't trust the people of Berk. He didn't trust them to be kind to outsiders; he didn't trust them to protect those they mistreated. He didn't trust them to accept him for who he was.

But Fishlegs had spent a couple weeks with Meatlug, and Hiccup had trusted him with the safety of the dragons. Astrid had flown on Stormfly, and Hiccup had trusted her with the safety of the village. Neither of them had betrayed him yet, and just yesterday they had risked their own status in the village merely to see if he would be okay. No human had ever done anything like that for him before. Could he trust them? Did he already trust them?

Hiccup didn't know.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Wow, I updated in less than two weeks! Unfortunately two data points is not enough to make a pattern, but hopefully I'll keep this up. Thanks for all the amazing reviews and please continue to let me know what you think!<strong>

## 12. Consequences

After Hiccup and Toothless tended to their injuries, the rider began to think about what would come next. There was no use in dwelling on the past, what was done was done, and as much as he knew that his father's words would haunt him forever, he couldn't forget about all the other things that had occurred.

The Red Death was weakened and angry. The flowers seemed to have done their job in poisoning her, but hadn't succeeded in finishing her off â€“ Hiccup didn't know if that was because she was somewhat immune, or if he merely hadn't used enough, either way it wasn't worth trying that plan again. Still, there had been some success. Hundreds of dragons had been freed from her thrall when her concentration had wavered. Hiccup counted that as a victory.

But now would come the repercussions. Once the monster recovered she would try to reclaim the lost dragons by focusing across longer distances. And in the meantime, fewer dragons meant an increase in

raids, especially since she would want to recover quickly. Hiccup would have to be extra vigilant to protect Berk and the nearby Viking tribes.

All of this and he still didn't have a way to get the Red Death to leave her nest. Putting the problem aside for later, Hiccup got organizing.

He set up a patrol around the edge of the mist, scheduling shifts so that he could be alerted if a raiding party ever left. He created groups to go on the defensive, to respond to the raids, and began to teach the dragons how to knock the enslaved ones from the queen's grasp.

It was a very tired dragon rider who collapsed on his hammock that night.

\* \* \*

><p>The week passed by quickly for the outcast as he threw himself into work to distract himself from his pain. Dragons were dragons, and they were all excellent fliers, but that didn't mean they knew how to work together as a group. Hiccup and Toothless moved instinctively together, but when they tried to get the dragons to maneuver around each other there were mishaps and crashes. Together they moved through drills: practicing weaving through nearby sea stacks, dodging fire balls, attacking one after the other, and flying close to each other.</p>

Being unable to return to the village also gave Hiccup a huge amount of freedom that he couldn't help but relish, despite the cost. No longer having to worry about being spotted or followed, or staying away too long, Hiccup was free to do as he pleased. He and Toothless were rarely far from each other, and, though they refrained from flying while they healed, continued to goof off together.

Midnight, Blizzard, and their young ones had settled down on the island once they heard about all that occurred. Midnight was one of Hiccup's first dragon friends, excluding Toothless, and she was probably the closest thing he had to a mother figure. She instantly began to fuss over him and Toothless, worrying about their wounds, making sure they got enough to eat (especially because Toothless was temporarily restricted from flying), and generally making sure that they were doing alright.

Spending time with the growing Nadders was also a great way for Toothless and Hiccup to let off steam. While Midnight's children didn't quite worship him like Ripwing did, they thought of the dragon and his rider as older brothers, and definitely enjoyed seeing them. Hiccup found himself returning to his old games, ones he hadn't played since he had begun freeing the dragons from Berk. They played hide and seek in the woods and told stories around the fire.

If it hadn't been for Toothless and Midnight, Hiccup might have given into the depression that was ever present, but the two dragons didn't give him any time to be depressed. Added to their efforts was the constant flow of new dragons who had been freed, the dragons from the arena who had all chosen to stay (Strangler constantly on his shoulder, tail wrapped lightly around his neck), and many, many others. Ripwing was never far, given that his parents nested on the

far side of the island. The Nadder who had been injured in Berk's last raid was also still there, healed now for the most part.

Hiccup was more popular than he had ever been, and not a single human was there to see it.

Astrid and Fishlegs had only visited once so far, given that the village was still in turmoil over Hiccup's exile. Worried that their absence would make the tense Vikings suspicious that they were helping him, Hiccup was reluctant to take them from Berk. He hadn't let them stay long either, but he had (briefly) gone flying with them and finally told them all he knew about the Red Death.

\* \* \*

><p>At the end of his first week as an exile, Hiccup agreed to meet Fishlegs and Astrid for a second time, already having arranged a meeting place knowing that he and Toothless would be healed enough by then. And so, for the first time as an exile, he approached the island of Berk, skirting around the village and making his way to the Cove to meet his human friends.</p>

Toothless, knowing his rider's pain, was eager to avoid the village, so Hiccup didn't actually see any evidence of his former tribe, but he couldn't still the slight pangs of homesickness that resulted from the familiar scenery.

Nevertheless, it was nice to return to the Cove, and to greet Fishlegs and Astrid once more. Only Fishlegs was waiting when Toothless, Meatlug, and Stormfly landed, the Viking quickly explaining in halted Dragonese that he and Astrid had split up, hoping to avoid the attention of the villagers.

'\_Smart,\_' Hiccup praised him, making sure to enunciate clearly. Fishlegs had known about Toothless longer than Astrid, and had spent more time with dragons than her, and it clearly showed. He beamed at the compliment.

As Fishlegs turned his attention to the dragons, and Meatlug in particular, Hiccup moved toward his old lean-to. Looking for anything he might have left behind, he kept one ear focused on the conversation behind him. Aside from picking up Dragonese fairly quickly (though he was far from fluent), Fishlegs had also fallen rather hard for Meatlug. It was a different sort of friendship than the one Hiccup and Toothless had, but no less valuable. The Viking teen clearly treasured every minute with his dragon, and Hiccup could tell that Meatlug felt the same. The Gronckle tended to follow after Fishlegs like an overgrown puppy, and it was Fishlegs' exuberant greeting Hiccup now listened to.

Grinning with his friend's happiness, Hiccup made his way back to the group, putting a few items in Toothless' saddlebags that had been left behind in the earlier rush.

"So," Hiccup began when there was a lull in the conversation, speaking Norse for Fishlegs' benefit, "how suspicious are they?" He didn't have to clarify who he was talking about.

Fishlegs paused, thinking. '\_Not too â€œ paranoid,\_' he started, speaking in broken Dragonese as he struggled to think of the right

word. If nothing else, Hiccup admired his friend's dedication to learning. '\_They no think we friends.\_'

The statement might not have been grammatically correct, but Hiccup got the message. He hadn't had friends in the village for a long time — there was no reason for anybody to be suspected of working alongside him. The person he had been closest to was Gobber, and no one would ever accuse him of being a traitor.

Despite the message, Hiccup grinned at his friend's effort (his father's words might still cause him pain, but he had been aware of and accepted his lack of human friends years ago). "Close," he said, before switching languages. '\_They don't think we're friends,\_' he growled slowly, waiting for Fishlegs to repeat it again. "Oh, and '\_paranoid'\_?" he let out a quick growl. "That means paranoid, if you were going for suspicious it would sound more like this." He demonstrated, happy to share his knowledge.

They were going over vocabulary by the time Astrid arrived, and switched to Norse for her benefit.

"Nice to see someone's having a good time," she grumbled, making her way down through the rocks.

Hiccup frowned slightly, wondering if her bad mood had anything to do with what was going on in Berk, or if it was just her. "Fishlegs was just telling me that nobody seemed too suspicious."

Astrid huffed, rubbing Stormfly's head in greeting and flashing an apologetic smile in their direction. "Sorry," she ground out. "But suspicious isn't the right word. They're tense. Gobber's training us harder than ever, despite the lack of dragons, and nobody knows how to react. I mean, you were the chief's son for Odin's sake. What you did!"

Fishlegs was quick to jump to Hiccup's defense. "Was the right thing to do."

"Oh I know," Astrid agreed, "it was just—"

"Sudden," Hiccup cut her off. He knew what she meant. Astrid believed him, because she had met the dragons, had seen the proof with her own two eyes, but everything had happened rather quickly, even for her. The village had had no such warning. One moment he was the son of the chief, doing fairly well in dragon training, next he was saving a dragon from his own father and releasing them from their cages when nobody was looking. Add to that his banishment and the fact that he had fled before his trial had even started!

Well, he had known from the beginning that it wouldn't go over well.

Astrid nodded in agreement, gaze moving to meet Hiccup's. "They're watching us closer than ever. I get off light because my parents know how hard I train, but I've noticed others watching me, and I heard Spitelout berating Snotlout earlier."

Hiccup paused in contemplation of what this meant for their little group, smile fading. "If you don't think you can get away!" he began, wondering if they would feel more comfortable if they, like

the rest of the village, cut all ties with him.

A snort was Astrid's response as Fishlegs shook his head. "It's not so bad," the larger Viking said.

"Please," Astrid countered, "I understand how you managed to do it this past year â€“ it's easy." (Hiccup hadn't yet told Astrid and Fishlegs exactly how long he had known Toothless.)

Still, Hiccup wasn't sure. "You are breaking the law by talking to me, or well, actually I'm breaking the law by being hereâ€¹" he paused, frowning slightly. "I know what that means to you." Astrid more than Fishlegs, but they were both loyal Vikings, currently going against their chief's ruling, and Hiccup knew it had to make them uneasy.

Fishlegs and Astrid exchanged glances that Hiccup couldn't read. He had spent so long with dragons that he could interpret their every nuance, whether they were hunkering down for play or to attack, how they used their bodies, rather than their faces to express emotions, but with humansâ€¹ Before telling these two humans the truth it had been so long since he had had a serious enough conversation with people. He could read some emotions pretty well: annoyance, disgust, indifference, curiosity (courtesy of Fishlegs), and anger, among others. But what Fishlegs and Astrid were thinking now Hiccup didn't know. He shifted uncomfortably on his feet, Toothless moving so that their sides were touching as he sensed his rider's unease.

"Hiccup, we're with you to the end," Astrid said seriously.

"We'll prove to everyone that you're right," Fishlegs continued. "It won't be like this forever."

Hiccup didn't know what to say. There was a poignant pause, not uncomfortable, but not quite comfortable either.

"Didn't you promise us a flight?" Astrid finally asked, breaking the silence.

And so he had.

\* \* \*

><p>Toothless' bruised wing had healed at that point, so Hiccup led his two friends on a merry chase, easily the fastest of the trio, before he slowed down to glide alongside them. They spent the rest of the flight fairly close together, Hiccup handing out pointers and tips. They still weren't entirely comfortable, legs gripping their dragons tightly and hands practically glued to the saddles he had made for them, but they were a lot more at ease, moving with their dragon as opposed to sitting stiffly in the saddle.</p>

But the point of the meeting hadn't been just to fly together. Hiccup knew they wanted to deal with the Red Death, and though he had told them everything already, there was still planning to be done. Together the group set down in the clearing that held his new home, and began to discuss the problem.

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><p>Slowly, a month passed in this manner. Hiccup continued to train the dragons to work against the Red Death. They had held back two raiding parties without him, and he and Toothless had helped hold back three more. He had been right that the frequency of them was increasing, which, after the third raid, had given him his new plan: he was going to starve her out. If the Red Death couldn't get enough food from her slaves, she would finally have to leave the nest and find it herself. The freedom Hiccup now had gave him enough time to notice every raid that occurred, which was a key part of his plan. He didn't know how long it would take, but he hoped that before long the nest would be empty. The only problem after that would be finding a way to defeat the creatureâ€œ He would cross that bridge when he came to it.</p>

Fishlegs and Astrid visited once a week, flying with him and their dragons, and Hiccup was surprised by how much he enjoyed their company. Even after he had told them the plan, they continued to meet with him. Maybe they just wanted to be there, in case there was a raid, but that didn't seem to be the case. They were interested in the dragons, and, more surprisingly, they were interested in what Hiccup had to say about the dragons.

He continued to help Fishlegs with his training, carving a bow for his friend and showing him how to use it. Astrid didn't need much help in that area, but once she saw how much Fishlegs could already speak Dragonese she made it a point to speak it whenever she could, not about to be bested. It was all good-natured fun though; Astrid had reached the point where she was willing to admit that Fishlegs was better at book learning than her. She more than made up for it with the physical tasks though.

His wounds healed nicely too, only a small scar on his back remaining, but the hurt from his father's words didn't fade quite so quickly. He'd had a lot of time to think about it, and realized that he couldn't blame his father entirely for what had happened. Yes, Stoick should have listened to him, but like he had said with Astrid, it had all been rather sudden from the village's point of view. From the very beginning, Hiccup had been convinced that no one would listen to him, that he would never be able to tell the Vikings the truth â€œ so he had never even bothered to try. He too, had to shoulder some of the blame for his banishment.

Some part of him couldn't help but dwell on the trial that he had missed and wonder if his presence actually \_could\_ have changed anything. He knew he hadn't had the time but if he had just talked to them, shown them the truth like he had shown Astrid and Fishlegs. It was no use thinking about it, Hiccup could never know what might have happened. As Toothless had said, he had to focus on what was happening.

Overall though, everything was going pretty well, Hiccup easily sliding into his new routine, when something happened that managed to surprise him.

\* \* \*

><p>He was meeting with Astrid and Fishlegs for the fifth time in the Cove, their three dragons saddled and ready to leave. Usually they took off right away, not wanting to stick around â€œ despite the fact that no other Vikings knew where the Cove was â€œ but this time

Hiccup was showing them the adjustments he had finally finished on their saddles. He had modified them beyond the dragon's specific body type, taking into account how Astrid and Fishlegs themselves flew, and how they sat in the saddle. It was just their luck that the one time they remained behind was the one time Vikings had followed the teens.<p>

Toothless was the first to notice something was off, growling wordlessly to get Hiccup's attention. The rider quickly shushed his friends, all three dragons and Hiccup cocking their heads to listen closely, tense and ready to flee.

The Berkians that tumbled out from behind the rocks were not who Hiccup had been expecting.

His mind had run through the scenarios, everything from Berk's best warriors ready to take him down to his father. Instead Snotlout was in front, being pushed reluctantly into the open by Ruffnut and Tuffnut. All three looked nervous and were looking between the three dragons and humans worriedly.

"Snotlout?" Astrid vocalized disdainfully, the first to speak. "What are you doing here?"

"It was their idea!" Snotlout blurted out, instantly blaming the twins. Realizing that didn't sound very impressive, he quickly shifted mannerisms, displaying his usual false arrogance. "Besides," he sneered, "you're the one hanging out with the village traitor."

Astrid wasn't willing to hear it. "Did you \_follow \_us?" she asked unhappily, raising an eyebrow in the intruders' direction.

In the background, Hiccup shifted uncomfortably, resisting the urge to flee and leave Astrid and Fishlegs to deal with their peers accordingly. Give him an angry dragon any day. Eyes narrowed distrustfully, Toothless shifted closer to him, and Hiccup took his own half-step in the black dragon's direction. No, he couldn't leave. 'If they get into trouble, it'll be because of me,' he reasoned to himself.

"Yeah we followed you," Ruffnut was responding.

"You've been ditching us for the past month," Tuffnut continued.

"Did you think we wouldn't notice?" Ruffnut finished. For once, it seemed the twins were in complete agreement.

Astrid scowled but didn't seem to know how to respond, exchanging glances with Fishlegs.

This time Snotlout was the one to break the silence. "Uh, guys," he interrupted hesitantly.

Hiccup turned to look his way and immediately had to hold back a smile. Stormfly was sniffing the Viking distrustfully and Snotlout was holding himself stiffly, trying not to move a muscle so as to not attract unwanted attention.

Astrid snorted. "She's not going to hurt you," she said dismissively, moving to pat Stormfly on the neck. Hiccup was grateful she had done so, because the Nadder had been quite tense, but the three newcomers evidently didn't feel the same. Snotlout stared at Astrid with wide eyes and the twins seemed to be temporarily speechless.

In the silence, Fishlegs noticed the tenseness of his own dragon, and quickly gave Meatlug her own scratch, never having moved from the Gronckle's side in the first place. He too seemed to be feeling out of place among the other teens.

Hiccup wondered what the teens' reactions would be to the dragons. They had relished training, but so had Astrid and Fishlegs — it was all they had known. What would they think of dragons as allies? As friends?

He should have known that the twins' first reactions would be about the danger — Ruffnut and Tuffnut were definitely the most reckless people he knew, and that was saying something in a town full of Vikings.

"Cool, can we try?" Tuffnut exclaimed, moving forward slightly toward Stormfly.

Snotlout stopped them skeptically. "Guys, hello? Dragons here!" he said, backing up slightly.

Astrid huffed. "They're not dangerous Snotlout."

Personally Hiccup thought that was a bit hypocritical of her, given how she had first reacted, but it also showed how far she had come. Either way, he didn't think he wanted to get involved.

Snotlout gave Astrid a look of disbelief and Hiccup was granted the chance to look at the conversation from an outsider's perspective. He had done his work convincing Astrid and Fishlegs, perhaps now it was their turn to do the same.

"The dragons are being controlled," Fishlegs finally spoke up, stepping forward with Meatlug. "They only attack because they have to."

Ruffnut and Tuffnut met Fishlegs halfway, eager to proclaim that they were touching a real live dragon, but Snotlout still looked skeptical.

"Says who?" he asked, crossing his arms and glaring at Fishlegs (with a wary glance in Stormfly's direction, still unwilling to take his eyes off the dragon).

Fishlegs and Astrid both turned toward Hiccup at the back of the gathering and all movement paused. Once more resisting the urge to flee (he didn't have to put up with this anymore, he could stay away forever if he wanted to), Hiccup met Snotlout's gaze. He knew that he presented a strange sight, at least to those who didn't know him, given that there was a Night Fury curled protectively around him.

Staying calm, he merely nodded, meeting Snotlout's gaze with a confidence that he usually reserved for his dealings with

dragons.

Snotlout eyed him uncertainly but the twins spoke before he could, gazing wide eyed at Toothless.

"Is that a Night Fury?" Ruffnut asked excitedly.

Toothless growled lightly in response, discouraging the twins from moving any closer (even they weren't so crazy as to approach a Night Fury), but now he had been noticed.

Hiccup nodded again. "This is Toothless. He's why I left," he said, anticipating that most of Snotlout's arguments would rely on his exiled status. "Dragons aren't what we thought they were. They can be trusted." Perhaps a demonstration would be best. He slid onto Toothless back and with one squeeze of his legs the Night Fury was airborne, leaving the Cove far behind. Looking back, he was surprised to see that Astrid and Fishlegs had followed suit, demonstrating their own abilities, and he executed a wide turn to circle back to the Cove.

Toothless grumbled reluctantly at their return, but Hiccup merely patted his friend comfortingly. With luck they would either convince the teens of the truth or never have to deal with them again.

\* \* \*

><p>Thankfully, the demonstration seemed to do the trick. Ruffnut and Tuffnut eagerly rushed forward, ready to try on their own already, and even Snotlout seemed to be looking forward to trying.</p>

That left Hiccup with one problem - there weren't enough dragons. Maybe if he put the twins with Astrid and Snotlout with Fishlegs it would work out?

All he knew was that any other possible dragons were back on Timberjack Island and that there was no way anyone other than him would get to ride Toothless. That was just the way it was. Not wanting to stay on Berk for too much longer, he quickly posed his problem to the eager to fly teens. They all readily agreed â€“ Astrid on the condition that Ruffnut would sit between her and Tuffnut â€“ and approached their respective dragons.

Riders in position, the three dragons took off once more, slower this time, and returned the way they had originally come. Hiccup could hear the twin's shouts of delight and Snotlout's slightly suppressed amazement, and couldn't hold back a grin of his own. They were flying. On dragons. Maybe this would be easier than he had thought.

\* \* \*

><p>On the island, only a few dragons were resting in the clearing. Thankfully, the ones most familiar with people, the ones from the arena, were among them, waiting for their friends to return.</p>

Hiccup introduced Snotlout to the Nightmare right away, knowing that his cousin would appreciate the flashy dragon. Ruffnut and Tuffnut he paired with the Zippelback. It occurred to him that it might be

rather odd to share a dragon, but the twins were rarely apart, no matter how much they loved to fight and argue with each other.

Proud of all that had been accomplished, Hiccup stood back and watched the proceedings. His best friend was at his side, also watching (if a bit more anxiously), Strangler was on his shoulder, crooning happily. Astrid was coaching the twins, and Fishlegs was trying to get Snotlout to say hello in Dragonese.

Hiccup reached down and gave Toothless a quick scratch. '\_See, they're not so bad\_, ' he growled out.

Toothless merely huffed. '\_They're younger. It's the old ones you need to convince\_. '

Hiccup would take the reluctant acceptance for what it was. There was still work to do, still things that needed to be said before the teens could be convinced, truth that needed to be told, but it was a start.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Little bit rushed at the ending there, but I was having trouble with that part. Here, have another apology at how bad I am at updating (the next story I publish will be at least halfway done before I post anything).<strong>

\*\*Thank you for all your amazing support, I have the best readers.\*\*

\*\*One semi-important announcement: I lied earlier. The next chapter will be another Interlude, and the second and last chapter not from Hiccup's POV.\*\*

\*\*Let me know what you thought! Thanks for reading!\*\*

### 13. Interlude: Fishlegs

Berk was different without Hiccup. That was really the only word Fishlegs could think to use. Different. It wasn't calmer or quieter. It wasn't louder or crazier. Nobody was especially relieved to have him gone, but, aside from Stoick and Gobber, nobody was especially sad to see him go. Berk was just, different.

Hiccup had never really been one to be noticed before. Sure there had been the occasional invention, the odd mishap that did little to endear him to the villagers, but for the most part Hiccup had walked unseen. Now Fishlegs knew that was because he had hardly been present in Berk at all, but when he tried to think back on how long it had been going on his mind drew a blank. Hiccup had never really been a big part of his life, not since they were really little. Had he been isolated from the village for so long?

It didn't matter in the end, Hiccup had found the friends that he deserved, and now he was gone. Fishlegs was grateful to be part of Hiccup's life now, but he wasn't sure how to feel about anything else. Should he be glad that Hiccup had been exiled?

Normally, he would say no, but he had seen the effects on Hiccup, and

they weren't what he had been expecting. True, there was the sorrow and depression that was expected when one was exiled and disowned by their father, but Hiccup also seemed more confident. Outside of Berk, with Toothless by his side, Hiccup had always walked straighter, held his head higher. In the village, thinking back, Fishlegs remembered Hiccup slinking silently behind the rest of the group, shoulders bowed, head ducked down. Now he was in charge, no longer a follower but a leader. Now he held himself as one who knew exactly what he was capable of.

It was a good change, but it had come about as the result of a terrible decision. How was he supposed to feel about that?

Because Hiccup had never had a big effect on Berk when he had been there, there wasn't much of a reaction now that he was gone. But things had still changed. A Viking had saved the life of a dragon, and not just any Viking but the son of the Chief himself. While nobody agreed with what Hiccup had done, it seemed to unsettle the villagers that he had managed to go so far astray (in their opinion) and nobody had noticed a thing.

Aside from the oddness of life in Berk though, Fishlegs' life had never been better. His friendship with Hiccup was stronger than it had ever been before, granting him a new perspective on life. He had a new best friend in Meatlug, even if he only saw her once a week. Astrid too had a new found respect for him. She listened to him and valued his opinion in a way she hadn't before. And now Snotlout and the twins were coming around, joining their little gang of dragon riders. They hung out together in the village, trained together, and gathered in secret to discuss exactly what they were going to do about the monster that threatened their village.

But what could they do? They were kids. Normally, Fishlegs would have gone immediately to the chief if he had any information about the nest — the very thing Vikings had been searching for for hundreds of years. But with the information they knew, none of them could tell any of the other villagers. If they tried to tell the truth, without proof, they would be branded as traitors. Fishlegs wasn't as strong as Hiccup; he didn't think he could live on his own.

"Right Fishlegs?"

It was a problem he couldn't solve. How could he defend Berk using methods that would have him exiled? Hiccup's intentions had been the best, of that Fishlegs had no doubt, but things hadn't worked out in his favor. Fishlegs had promised to change that, desperate to let Hiccup know that he stood by him, but he didn't yet know how, exactly, to follow through with his promise.

"Fishlegs?"

Fishlegs started, glancing up and remembering where he was. Snotlout, the twins, and Astrid were all looking at him expectantly, and he blushed at the attention, realizing he had gotten distracted in his own thoughts. They had been talking about something completely nonsensical (he couldn't remember what) and he had drifted off, reflecting on the fact that they were capable of having a secret conversation in the middle of the dining hall.

Hiccup's exile really had changed Berk, and the mood from the other

Vikings present was somber, with little conversation. Nobody was paying attention to them.

"Sorry," Fishlegs apologized. "What were you saying?"

"I was \_trying \_to tell these boneheads that we can't tell Stoick the truth." Astrid glared at said boneheads.

"And I say why not?" Snotlout argued back. "This is important â€“ the chief needs to know."

Fishlegs shook his head. "Hiccup said not too, and I agree with him. We don't have any proof."

"Oh, so now we're all going along with what \_Hiccup\_ says? When did we start listening to him?" Snotlout asked scornfully.

"Maybe when he started riding \_dragons\_?" Astrid responded sarcastically.

Ruffnut and Tuffnut "oohhed", high fiving each other. When Snotlout turned to glare at them, Ruffnut only shrugged. "What? She's got a point."

"It's \_Hiccup\_," Snotlout tried to argue.

Before anyone could dignify that with a response (before Fishlegs could state that that was exactly what made him worth listening to), loud shouting echoed through the hall from outside, followed by distinctly familiar sounds. The dragons had finally circled back to Berk.

Vikings began to run from the hall, ready for battle, and Fishlegs spared a glance at his companions. "Remember, we don't kill dragons anymore," he told them, not that any of them had managed to kill a dragon last time, and then he too was gone.

He bolted for his house, selecting a hammer as his weapon once he got there â€“ something decidedly nonlethal, or at least safer than an axe. Darkness had already fallen while the teens had been eating, but the villagers were quick to act in a raid and the burning towers to light the night had already been erected.

This was only his second raid as a fighter, but Fishlegs was more than ready to defend his village. He fought back a Deadly Nadder with his mom, forcing it to flee, before separating from her, caught up in the chaos.

\* \* \*

><p>Sometime during the raid, Fishlegs messed up. He dropped his hammer and got thrown to the ground, scrambling backward, and cursing his earlier hesitation. He hadn't wanted to seriously hurt any dragons, but now it looked like he would pay for that with his life. His hammer was too far away, lying uselessly on the ground, and the Gronckle he had been fighting was almost on top of him. His words weren't working either; the Gronckle was too enthralled to notice him. Hiccup had warned them about that â€“ reminding them that the Queen was desperate to retain control of the dragons she had left.</p>

As he opened his mouth to scream for help a black blur flew by him, diving down from the sky and barreling into the enslaved Gronckle. Fishlegs instantly recognized Toothless, Hiccup somehow managing to stay seated.

He watched as the two dragons went flying, wrestling with each other, and blinked as he saw Hiccup disentangle himself from the mess. It had happened too quickly for him to see how the rider had done it, but before he knew it Hiccup was approaching him, Toothless and the Gronckle moving out of Fishlegs' sight as they continued to wrestle.

'\_You alright?\_' Hiccup asked him, offering him a hand to help him up.

Fishlegs took it as he stared, barely recognizing his friend. He had never flown at night with Hiccup, nor had he ever stopped a raid with him, so Hiccup had never had any reason to wear anything other than his usual clothes, but now... Hiccup was wearing a dark suit, pitch black like his Night Fury to help him blend into the sky. It seemed to have armor plating on it, defending his arms, shoulders, and chest, but remained slim and fit remarkably well from what he could see. Fishlegs didn't know if Hiccup would ever stop surprising him.

"Yeah," Fishlegs said breathlessly in Norse, before switching to Dragonese. '\_Yeah, I'm alright. Thanks\_.'

'\_No problem\_,'\_ Hiccup responded. '\_Stay safe.\_' He took off without another word, jogging in the direction Toothless had disappeared. Fishlegs was stuck merely watching again as Hiccup whistled, scaling a house quickly and jumping off into the air. Toothless once again appeared out of the night, this time to safely catch his rider before they both glided away into darkness.

He hadn't even had time to scold Hiccup for coming. The exile was risking his life just by returning to Berk, but he had done it anyway. Awed by Hiccup's bravery, Fishlegs found his hammer again and returned to the fray, determined to do his part.

\* \* \*

><p>Later, when the fighting seemed to be finished, Fishlegs made his way toward the center of Berk, where everyone else seemed to be gathering. As soon as he got there, it was immediately clear why.</p>

Vikings formed a circle around three forms, uncharacteristically silent as they stared at the unexpected figures. Stoick was on one side of the clearing, hammer in hand, obviously just having finished a fight, staring straight ahead with disbelief. Hiccup and Toothless were on the other side.

As Fishlegs arrived, Toothless reared up on his hind legs, wings flaring impressively as he hissed in Stoick's direction. His eyes were narrowed, his pupils mere slits, and his muscles tense and ready to jump into the air. Hiccup did nothing to stop his dragon's display of aggression, easily staying in place as the Night Fury's front legs hit the ground again.

Almost as one, the Vikings seemed to take a collective step back. He and Astrid (standing ahead of him but not too far away) seemed to be the only ones unshaken. Even Stoick looked uneasy.

Across the clearing, father and son locked gazes. Hiccup was the one to speak.

"I'm sorry," he said calmly, his voice projecting eerily throughout the crowd of silent Vikings. "I should have told you the truth from the beginning."

And then he was gone. Toothless took off as soon as Hiccup finished speaking, disappearing into the night sky with one mighty flap of his wings. The silence remained for a moment longer, Vikings looking around to try and spot the legendary dragon, but it soon became clear that the Night Fury was just as invisible as always. Chaos erupted.

Moving toward Astrid nearby, Fishlegs used his bulk to his advantage, pushing through the crowd to approach her. "What happened?" he asked, forgoing any greeting. Even two months ago he never would have thought of approaching her so informally, but time spent with Hiccup and the dragons had changed the both of them. Besides, she was closer to Stoick than he had been, and he was hoping she had seen why Hiccup had landed in the first place.

"He saved Stoick's life," Astrid said, turning away from the sky to look at him. She shook her head in disbelief. "That was so stupid of him. Idiot! He could have gotten caught."

"Astrid," Fishlegs admonished, "Hiccup and Toothless can handle themselves." He agreed with her, but he also was smart enough to know that there was nothing they could do about it. Sometimes he thought Astrid didn't realize exactly how long Hiccup had survived without them, but then again, even he didn't know.

"Right," Astrid refocused instantly. "Stoick was fighting a Nightmare, it had managed to sneak up on him and catch him off guard. I didn't see the beginning but when I got here it looked like the Nightmare was about to..."

She trailed off, but Fishlegs understood. Anyone who had been in the village the past month would. "He's fighting distracted."

Astrid nodded. "Anyway, that was when Hiccup attacked. He came out of nowhere, diving on the dragon. It was over in seconds. And then, well, you saw the rest."

Fishlegs nodded, glancing around to see Stoick still in the clearing, talking with Spitelout. Glancing back at Astrid, it was clear she had the same idea, and they silently moved closer, trying to determine what their chief was talking about.

"â€œ least get any dragons?" Stoick was asking as they approached.

Spitelout shook his head. "It looked like the net was cut."

Frustration crossed Stoick's face before he seemed to realize who had probably been responsible. Watching the normally, well, stoic, chief shake his head, despair coming over him, was surprisingly emotional. Fishlegs had thought Stoick unmovable, but Hiccup's exile was hitting him hard.

He and Astrid left before they could be spotted eavesdropping, but Fishlegs couldn't stop dwelling on Stoick's face. The man was devastated. He loved Hiccup, Fishlegs never doubted that, but he also thought that what Hiccup was doing was wrong. He couldn't understand his son's actions, and it seemed to be breaking his heart. Fishlegs could only hope that seeing Hiccup atop Toothless would grant the chief some clarity.

\* \* \*

><p>The raid seemed to return some semblance of normalcy to the village, but Gobber could still be seen moping about the forge, and Spitelout was still picking up a lot of Stoick's slack. The subject of Hiccup had been taboo before, but now he was being spoken about in hushed whispers, quickly silenced whenever Stoick neared. Hiccup had been riding a <em>dragon</em>, people were saying everywhere. They didn't know what to make of it.

On one hand, it seemed that everything they had feared had come true. Hiccup had sided with the enemy; he was a Viking no longer.

On the other hand, he and said enemy had saved the chief's life, had fought valiantly against another dragon.

What did it mean? How had a mere exile, the least like a Viking of any of them, managed to tame the previously unseen dragon?

Fishlegs hid his unease at these sorts of questions. Hiccup had no more tamed Toothless in order to ride him than he himself had tamed Astrid to treat him with respect. They were friends, but that seemed to be something the villagers couldn't comprehend. It was just another thing for Fishlegs to feel helpless about, another time where all he could do was stand by and watch. He had never felt so useless in his life â€“ not even when he had done terribly in dragon training.

He found himself distracted every time Gobber pulled them out of village for training, which was happening less and less now that they had gone through two raids together. It didn't matter though, Gobber was just as distracted and hardly seemed to notice Fishlegs' lack of focus.

When he wasn't training, or with the other teenagers, Fishlegs found himself wandering the woods. Sometimes he walked down well-worn paths; sometimes he looked for the hidden ones, making his way across new ground. He headed toward the Cove more often than not, interested in where Hiccup had spent his time, but couldn't bring himself to enter Hiccup's own lean-to. He didn't think Hiccup would mind, but Fishlegs still considered it to be private. Instead he found himself imagining how life would have been for the exile. Here was the fire pit, remnants of long-cooled ash still remaining, where he and Meatlug and Hiccup and Toothless had sat on cold nights. There was a charred spot on the ground, blackened and dead where Toothless had liked to curl up and sleep.

It was weird, to think that Hiccup had spent so much time here, not even that far from Berk, and not one of them had noticed.

\* \* \*

><p>Eventually, a week had gone by and it was time to meet up with Hiccup again. Fishlegs somehow managed to keep the honor of being the first of the teens to leave the village (Astrid would follow with Snotlout, then the twins, so not to attract attention), which meant he was the first to greet Hiccup.</p>

The dragon rider didn't look to be injured, but Fishlegs had been around Hiccup enough after the poison flower delivery to know that his friend was good at hiding his pain.

'\_Hey,\_' he called out upon entering the Cove, greeting all five dragons and the lone human.

They seemed to have already known he was coming, superior dragon hearing and all, but Meatlug still pounced on him excitedly as the others returned the greeting.

After hugging Meatlug â€“ and feeding her one of her favorite rocks that he had brought along â€“ Fishlegs finally turned to Hiccup, grin fading slightly. He wanted to ask about the raid, and what Hiccup had been thinking showing up, and if he had been injured, but his vocabulary in Dragonese wasn't that good yet, and he didn't want to scold Hiccup minutes after arriving. '\_Did you get hurt, nights ago?\_' he ended up asking, looking over both dragon and rider.

'\_We're both fine,\_' Hiccup assured him, giving him the same cursory glance. '\_You?\_'

Fishlegs shook his head.

'\_Sorry I didn't stay, didn't want to be seen.\_'

'\_I understand.\_' Some part of Fishlegs wanted to say, "you shouldn't have shown up then", but he held back, remembering what he had told Astrid. Besides, she would probably scold Hiccup just fine when she got there. '\_Were there any others?\_' He didn't yet know the word for a dragon raid â€“ what would the dragons themselves call it?

'\_Raids?\_' Hiccup asked, growling slowly for Fishlegs' benefit.  
'\_Yeah, one. She's getting desperate.\_'

Toothless snorted in the background. '\_She's beyond desperate; this foolhardy plan of yours might actually work.\_'

While Fishlegs didn't understand all that Toothless had growled (what sort of plan?), he found himself blinking at the fact that the dragon had spoken at all. Toothless made it very clear that he didn't trust Vikings â€“ any of them. He wasn't willing to forget all that had been done to Hiccup over the years, and while he trusted them because Hiccup did, it clearly didn't mean he had to like them. That the Night Fury was contributing to a conversation that Fishlegs was part of, even if he had been looking at Hiccup when he had spoken, said a

lot for how much he trusted him.

Scrambling for something to say in response, Fishlegs hesitated a moment before speaking. '\_And then what?' he asked. Hiccup's plan had been very thorough â€“ if the goal was merely to get the Red Death to leave her nest. Beyond that, nothing had been planned out, at least, nothing Fishlegs knew about.

Hiccup shrugged. '\_And then we fight, I guess.\_'

An uneasy silence followed. Fishlegs wondered if there was more to it, and Hiccup simply didn't want to put his human friends in danger, or if Hiccup really didn't have much of a plan. He didn't know how to ask either.

Eventually he changed the topic, asking about the armor Hiccup had been wearing during the raid, and watched as the dragon rider eagerly jumped on the chance to share his knowledge.

Fishlegs had even managed to lose himself in the conversation, absorbing all that Hiccup could tell him and asking numerous questions all the while. Their conversation had switched to Norse by the time Astrid and Snotlout arrived, most of the conversation too technical for Fishlegs' still growing vocabulary.

Once all the teens had reached the cove, it was finally time to fly. Hiccup had produced more saddles, showing Snotlout and the twins how to hold on properly, and everyone was eager to take off. It was cloudy, suggesting more snow soon, but nothing yet had fallen from the sky and the wind was practically nonexistent, eliminating part of the chill that came with flight.

Hiccup and Toothless took the lead, but the dragons all knew where they were going, so the Vikings' lack of experience didn't really matter. Even after all this time, it was still awe inspiring to see Hiccup and Toothless fly together. They moved as one, leaning at the same time, diving together. Hiccup sat so weightlessly in the saddle that it seemed that he wasn't even holding on.

The clearing that held Hiccup's new home was mostly empty when they arrived, most of the dragons having cleared out when they heard the humans were coming, but there were some new additions that Fishlegs hadn't met yet â€“ injured dragons from the raids probably.

Strangler greeted them first, landing briefly on Fishlegs' head before resuming his usual perch on Hiccup's shoulder, tail wrapped lightly around his neck. Next was a huge Monstrous Nightmare, crooning anxiously as it stretched its long neck in Hiccup's direction.

Fishlegs couldn't make out all the words, but it sounded as though the dragon was talking about a friend, one who was injured or sick. It sounded worried.

Hiccup easily understood it though (her, him? Fishlegs wasn't experienced enough to tell â€“ what little Viking literature there was didn't really focus on telling dragons apart, just on how dangerous they were). He turned back to the group, all still atop their dragons aside for Fishlegs.

"Why don't you guys race for a bit?" he suggested. "Get used to flying. I've got to take care of something real quick before we can talk."

Everyone easily agreed, falling back on their competitive Viking spirits, but Fishlegs was already on the ground, and wasn't really interested in testing Meatlug's speed.

As the four teens raced through the sky on their three dragons, Fishlegs stayed on the ground with Hiccup, watching the figures as they receded from sight.

'\_Can I help?\_' he asked, making sure to speak in Dragonese so that Hiccup would know he was serious.

Said dragon rider eyed him cautiously before nodding. '\_There are bandages inside,\_' he said, gesturing toward the small hut, '\_do you mind getting them?\_'

Fishlegs shook his head, gave Meatlug a quick pat, and made his way toward Hiccup's shelter. That was all it was really, shelter. Hiccup's home was the open sky, with Toothless, the hut was merely for storing things, a place to sleep, or somewhere to huddle under when the weather got bad. It showed little evidence of being lived in, aside from a hammock hastily strung up and a makeshift table, saddlebags strewn about. It was a decent size, but not big enough for Toothless, which was how Fishlegs knew Hiccup rarely spent any time inside.

Moving toward the largest pile of belongings, Fishlegs tried to remember where the bandages had been. Had it been the bag with the extra-large clasp? Or that one over there, with the mismatched thread? He picked up a possible candidate and winced as several small objects came tumbling out. Fishlegs quickly knelt to gather them up, only to stop in surprise at what he found.

Dragons. About a dozen, small, whittled dragons. Only, not quite. There was something off about them. Fishlegs picked up a Gronckle first, eyes moving toward its legs â€“ one of which looked like it had been crudely hewn off. A mistake maybe? But the Terror he picked up next, that one was missing the tip of its tail. And then two Nadders, one carved lying down, a horrible scar etched into one of its outstretched wings, the other missing its eye. These didn't look like mistakes, these were disabled dragons, torn and injured, perhaps by a Viking's hand.

Glancing over the small pile on the ground, Fishlegs' eyes were drawn to a figure he hadn't noticed before. It was Hiccup. Skinny, scrawny, human Hiccup, lying amongst a pile of damaged dragons. It was clear that the rider hadn't put as much effort into his own figure, the details few, but Fishlegs could still tell that it was him by the vest the wooden figure was wearing. What did that say about the boy, about the man he was today, that in the midst of carving dragons that were separated from the others by physical disabilities, he had taken the time to carve himself?

Creaking noises distracted him from his contemplation, and Fishlegs glanced up to see Hiccup enter the hut.

'Sorry,' the rider was saying, 'forgot you didn't know where everything was.' He trailed off, looking at the Gronckle still in Fishlegs hand. 'Oh, you found those old things?'

Hiccup didn't seem to understand what was wrong with the picture, and Fishlegs sent a subtle glance toward the lone human figurine. 'Are they?' his Dragonese just wasn't good enough for the conversation. "Are they real dragons?"

"Ones I've met?" Hiccup asked, following Fishlegs' lead. He nodded, moving to kneel on the ground beside Fishlegs and picking up a carving of his own. 'Yeah.' He displayed the small Terror, missing the tip of his tail. "This guy had trouble flying straight, always wobbly in the air. That guy" he nodded toward the Gronckle in Fishlegs' hand- "he stayed with me for two years, getting used to things before he decided to move on."

Fishlegs hesitated, then picked up the small carving of the rider beside him. 'And this one?'

Hiccup stared at the figure for a long moment, not answering.

'I was seven,' he finally said, glancing toward the door, where Fishlegs was sure Toothless was waiting.

Fishlegs turned to look at him. 'What?' he asked, not sure what Hiccup was talking about.

'I was seven when I met Toothless.'

Hiccup turned to meet Fishlegs' stare, but the Viking teenager couldn't think of anything to say in response.

"Do you remember that time when I was seven years old?" Hiccup asked, continuing in Norse. "I ran screaming into the village about how I had found an injured dragon in the woods. Looking back, I've never been happier than people ignored me."

Fishlegs continued to stare. \_Seven.\_ Hiccup had been so alone even at the age of seven, and still none of them had noticed. He tried to think of a response. "All that time?"

"And Toothless has been by my side for all of it," Hiccup said quietly.

'I'm sorry.'

Hiccup shook his head. 'Don't be. I didn't say it because I wanted you to feel bad. I wanted you to understand.'

And finally, \_finally\_, Fishlegs was starting to. Why Hiccup was so at ease among large groups of dragons. Why the dragons were so at ease around him. Why Dragonese seemed so natural to him. Why, for the most part, he didn't seem to mind being away from Berk. Why Toothless didn't trust them and knew that they hadn't treated Hiccup well. And why, so many years ago, he had carved himself into a group of misfits, wondering what was wrong with him and why he didn't belong.

When everything was over with, would Hiccup even want to return to

Berk?

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: A nice quick update for my awesome readers. Everyone seemed to approve of my inclusion of Fishlegs, so here's a chapter all about him. I really enjoyed writing this, and it was fun to see his POV. Let me know what you think about how it turned out, and thanks for continuing to read and encourage me!</strong>

#### 14. The Time for Trust

Hiccup leaned back in satisfaction at his handiwork, nodding when it seemed the bandage would hold. Snow had begun to lightly fall, small flakes already sticking to the frozen ground and chilling his hands as he had worked. Above, between Hiccup and the gray clouds that blanketed the sky, raced three dragons: Stormfly, the Nightmare, and the Zippleback. In front of him was another Nightmare, skin a pale red that wasn't quite pink and still young, stretched out on the ground as he offered his injured wing to Hiccup. To his left was Fishlegs, who had helped him to bandage the small Nightmare, kneeling on the ground beside him. Hiccup smiled as he thought of how far Fishlegs had come, Meatlug further beyond on Fishlegs' left. Curled on Hiccup's shoulder, Strangler had dozed off, not really interested in Hiccup's healing skills, his small body providing a bit of warmth that the rider relished.

And to his right, as always, sat Toothless, ears perked as he listened to the dragons flying overhead, eyes slightly unfocused as he too dozed slightly. Hiccup's smile widened as he stood, patting the Nightmare slightly.

'\_Try not to fly for a while,\_' the rider warned the dragon. '\_But it'll heal up nicely.\_'

The Nightmare chirped his thanks, giving the dragon equivalent of a grin, and headed off on foot toward a group of young dragons gathered at the edge of the clearing. Midnight's children were among them and Blizzard was watching the small group closely, so Hiccup didn't have to worry about the Nightmare acting too rambunctiously and ruining the fresh bandages.

He turned toward Fishlegs, who had also stood. '\_Thanks, did you want to race orâ€>?\_' He trailed off, gesturing toward Fishlegs' friends above them.

The Viking shook his head. He was staring at Hiccup differently, a bit wide eyed, but Hiccup didn't know the reason for the shift. Maybe he was just finally realizing that he was standing amongst the enemies of his village? '\_I'll help you,\_' Fishlegs offered instead.

Whatever the cause of his friend's change in attitude, Hiccup understood this at least. The other teens considered dragon riding to be a thrill, it was something new, something dangerous, and it offered an experience that nothing else could compete with. Besides, given the tension in the village, having time to be themselves, to challenge each other and engage in familiar Viking competitiveness? There was no question as to why they had jumped on the

opportunity.

But he and Fishlegs had never really been a part of that. The Viking competitiveness, the need to prove yourself stronger and faster than your peers, it wasn't something they had ever felt. Hiccup too, loved flying, and he was sure that Fishlegs did as well, but he didn't fly for the competition. He flew for the freedom, for the friendship, for the chance to let the world fall away beneath him and spend hours in the air, neither he nor Toothless needing to speak. He flew for the thrill of discovery, of finding new lands and discovering new species and meeting new dragons. If anyone could understand that, it was Fishlegs.

'\_Thanks,\_' he replied, '\_but I've already taken care of everyone that's been injured. Maybeâ€œ|\_ he thought hard, remembering the old wooden figures Fishlegs had found when looking for the bandages. He had a lot of other old stuff, tucked away in his saddlebags. '\_Hold on,\_' he said, remembering certain things, '\_I've got something for you.\_'

Leaving Fishlegs with Meatlug and Toothless, he ducked back into his hut, digging through his pile of belongings to find his old journals. 'No, not that one, that's all drawings.' It was full of his attempts at cataloging and understanding flight, filled with dragons in motion and even a few birds. He set it aside, picking up the next one. 'Too personal.' That one followed the first, more of a diary than a journal. 'Aha, these three'll do.' Hiccup pulled three old journals from the pile, returning to his friends.

'\_Here,\_' he said, passing them into Fishlegs arms. '\_You'll like these.\_'

Fishlegs took them, frowning uncertainly before he flipped open the first one. A sketch of Toothless was splayed out, just a basic drawing with the dragon's shape, no personality to it.

"Another book for your collection," Hiccup told him, switching to Norse. The dragons had no sound for book in their language, and Hiccup wasn't about to confuse Fishlegs with noises he had come up by himself over the years, wanting to communicate more effectively with Toothless. "That one holds almost every dragon type I've met."

Fishlegs looked up, astonished, then flipped through the next few pages. They were filled with data about Night Furies, eating habits, sleeping habits, things Toothless had been able to tell him. Next was a sketch of a Nadder, followed with more information. After that was a Terror, then a Gronckle, and so on. Hiccup had filled the journal years ago, making his own study of dragons, and he didn't really need it anymore.

"Hiccupâ€œ|" Fishlegs seemed beyond grateful, eagerly paging through it.

'\_Hold on,\_' Hiccup said, grabbing the book back before the Viking could get too engrossed. '\_You haven't seen the others.\_'

The next one was the oldest of the three, the first half filled with every sort of saddle variation that Hiccup could think of. He detailed the process he used to make them, what he altered depending

on the body type of the dragon that would be wearing it, and the best sorts of materials to use. The second half was filled with maps that Hiccup had long since memorized, places close to Berk where he had spent a lot of his free time. The cliff with the dragon nip was labeled. Terror Island, with its square rock formations, had a page to itself. Places to stay away from, where territorial dragons made their nests, were carefully marked out.

The third notebook was filled with more sketches, followed by information, but not about dragons themselves. Instead, it held pictures of plants and native wildlife, geological formations and other interesting things he had come across. There were pages and pages dedicated to dragon nip, Hiccup having attempted to determine exactly how it affected dragons, and if there were any it didn't affect, as well as how different amounts changed the reaction. The Blue Oleander, the flower he had used to poison the Red Death, was also somewhere within the pages. There was an old comment about a fog covered territory he had come across, before realizing the fog was created by a peculiar type of dragon, the Smothering Smokebreath.

'\_This is amazing,\_' Fishlegs said breathlessly, paging through the books.

Hiccup laughed. '\_Don't read it all at once!\_' He had forgotten exactly how much Fishlegs loved learning, and how eager his friend always was to gain new information. Tugging the books from his friend's hand, he stowed them in Meatlug's only saddlebag, never having removed either hers or Toothless' saddle since they had landed. Fishlegs stared longingly after them, causing Hiccup to laugh again. '\_You can read them back at Berk, c'mon.\_' Nobody would notice Fishlegs reading another book, and no one would bother to see \_which\_ book Fishlegs was reading. He had more to show his friend.

'\_Are you sure you don't mind?\_' Fishlegs asked as they got into their saddles, the Viking double-checking that his saddlebag was secure.

'\_I've got everything in those memorized by now,\_' Hiccup replied, nudging Strangler so the dragon would know that they were about to take flight. '\_Don't worry about it.\_'

Toothless took off without a word from him, knowing him well enough to do so without prompting, and as they took off Hiccup leaned down to his friend's ear to tell him where they were headed. They flew low over the trees, flying at a slower speed so that Meatlug could fly beside them. Hiccup found himself smiling wider than he had in weeks. In all the chaos with the Red Death, and being exiled, he'd spent so much time worrying and planning. Now though, he had adjusted to his new life, he had accepted what had happened to him (even if he terribly missed his father, even if he still ached to hear Gobber crack another joke, poking good-natured fun at him). In all that had happened, he had forgotten how hard Fishlegs had tried to befriend the dragons, how much he had looked forward to leaving Berk and spending time with Hiccup and Meatlug in the Cove.

"One day, maybe you'll tell me all your secrets," Fishlegs had said at that first meeting, not so long ago, "I have a feeling you have a lot more than a few dragons in a Cove."

It was time Hiccup shared some secrets with his loyal friend.

\* \* \*

><p>At Hiccup's instruction, Toothless didn't fly very far, taking them to another clearing on the same island. Though it was smaller than the first, it was where the dragons liked to gather when the Vikings were visiting Timberjack Island. Half of the reason behind that was at Hiccup's request, not wanting to overwhelm the teens in regards to sheer number of dragons. The other half was the dragons' own preference, preferring to be away from those who wouldn't understand them. Only the young ones, with Blizzard watching over them, and several injured dragons had remained in Hiccup's clearing.</p>

That meant that they set down in a field full of dragons, some old friends who had decided to stick close to Hiccup during the chaos, and others who were new and recognized the safety in numbers. None of them came over to greet them as they landed, far too used to Hiccup's new freedom to come and go as he pleased now, but many glanced their way.

Looking over at Fishlegs, Hiccup was happy to see the wonder and astonishment that crossed his friend's face, glad that there was no trace of fear.

Midnight was there, resting as she took a break from watching over her flock. Mist the Changewing was sharing a meal with Ripwing, two new Gronckles, and Zippleback Hiccup hadn't seen before, a large pile of fish splayed out before them, with some rocks piled at the side for the Gronckles to chew on. Strangler took off from Hiccup's shoulder as they landed, joining another group of Terrors that included the rider's friends Forge and Scarlet. There was an old Thunderdrum named Star that Hiccup saw periodically that was surrounded by younger dragons looking for wisdom, including Ripwing's mother among them. (Hiccup was pretty sure that she and the Thunderdrum were old friends, but he didn't speak with either of them too often).

Fishlegs took it all in with wide eyes, marveling at the range and number of dragons present. Hiccup didn't bother to go through the species, he was sure Fishlegs already knew. Sliding from Toothless' saddle, and nudging Fishlegs to get him to do the same, the two riders and their dragons made their way over to the closest group of dragons.

Over the course of the next hour, Hiccup introduced Fishlegs to all of the dragons in the clearing. Some were distrustful, but all of them had enough faith in Hiccup to know that Fishlegs wouldn't bring them harm. Meatlug was a big help in that area too, more than willing to express her love for her rider. Even Toothless participated in the conversations, something he had held back from doing around the Vikings, now that they could understand him.

His Viking friend was beyond ecstatic at the meetings. He gushed in front of Star and Ripwing and even Mist, the Thunderdrum and Timberjack and Changewing not as common as most of the other dragons around Berk. And though he stumbled through some of the conversations, Hiccup had to say that he was remarkably fluent after only two months â€“ then again, he'd had a human translator, Hiccup

and Toothless had had to break through the language barrier all their own so who was he to determine the learning curve for Dragonese?

Eventually though, they knew that the other teens couldn't race forever, and they had things to talk about before Hiccup let the others go back to Berk. Fishlegs returned to the clearing while Toothless flew upward, Hiccup easily locating the other teens and getting their attention.

Finally, almost two hours after their arrival, they were getting to the reason the other Vikings had come.

Saddles removed from their dragons, Stormfly, the Zippelback, and the Nightmare napped in a haphazard pile, curled up against each other behind their riders. Astrid, Snotlout, and the twins, in that order, sat on one side of the fire pit that Hiccup had built up, resting on two benches that were little more than slightly flattened logs. The fire pit itself was nothing but ash, still too early in the day for Hiccup to waste the wood he had gathered. Snow had lightly covered the ground, but one hot blast from Stormfly, flames carefully positioned so as not to char the ground, had easily been enough to melt it.

Fishlegs sat on the third bench, a small gap between him and Astrid large enough for Meatlug to squeeze in. Fishlegs leaned against her as she dozed, already knowing the information that Hiccup was about to dispense. Hiccup himself was directly across from Astrid, on the ground leaning back on Toothless. There was an open spot between Fishlegs and the twins that Hiccup had purposely planned to fit his Night Fury, and the black dragon stretched to fill it now, taking his usual position behind his rider.

"Alright," Hiccup began, directing his conversation toward Snotlout and the twins. "I told you that there's a monstrous beast at the center of the dragon's nest. And I told you that she's controlling them, that the only reason they raid us is because they'll die if they don't. But there's a lot more to the story. The Red Death lives at the center of the nest. We've never seen her leave it. In order to stop the raids, we have to stop her, and in order to do that we need to get her to leave the nest. Right before I was exiled -" (and was it getting easier to say that?) "- we, and some other dragons, fed her a flower that's poisonous to dragons." Hiccup paused to take in everyone's surprising attentiveness before continuing on with the story. He mentioned why Strangler had come to Berk in the first place, and the myriad of dragons that had escaped the beast's control. He explained the increased number of raids that was occurring, and warned them to be prepared when they returned to the village. Then he detailed his plan. "If we stop enough raids, enough dragons from getting through, she'll starve. She'll need to leave the nest herself. That's when we can attack."

There was a brief moment of silence as everyone absorbed all the information. Fishlegs and Astrid had already known everything, but Snotlout and the twins were hearing it for the first time. It was a lot to take in.

"Why can't we just kill her why she's in her stupid nest?" Snotlout asked, frowning, unusually contemplative. Everyone was more than aware of the magnitude of the situation and how much the outcome

would affect them all.

Hiccup shook his head. "The nest is essentially a hollowed out mountain â€“ she's surrounded by solid rock, we'd just get eaten."

"How long do you think it'll take to starve her out?" Fishlegs asked.

"Only a week or two more, she can't be getting enough food right now."

"Well then this isn't going to work," Astrid immediately responded. "We need to be ready, and seeing you once a week doesn't give us much time."

Hiccup stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"She's right, we don't know what we're doing here â€“ we need to know how to fight on dragons. You know how to do that." Fishlegs again (Snotlout would never actually voice the fact that Hiccup was better, even if he knew it to be true).

The dragon rider looked between the teens present, each of them staring at him expectantly, and came to a realization. "Alright, you'll have to take turns though; you can't all leave every day. I'll meet Fishlegs tomorrow, Astrid and Snotlout the day after that, and then the twins. We'll keep that up for as long as we can, does that work?"

Fishlegs nodded, Astrid and Snotlout exchanged glances, and the twins complained about going last.

Hiccup hesitated, trying to think of what to say next. He still wasn't sure that the Vikings should be helping. They were right, they didn't know how to fight on dragons, they had no experience â€“ they had no idea what they were getting into. And on top of all that, Hiccup had no idea when or if the Red Death would leave the nest. Should he really take a detour to Berk just to pick up five Viking teenagers? 'You're a teenager,' he reminded himself. 'And you need all the help you can get.'

But how were the Vikings any different than the dragons he was asking to help him? This was their fight too, and if Hiccup had learned anything from Berk, it was that Vikings had stubbornness issues; they weren't going to let him say no. So he hadn't.

"Then let's get started," he finally said, sitting up and leaning forward slightly. There was a lot they had to learn, and it didn't all involve flying.

\* \* \*

><p>Hours later the snow was still falling gently. A fire had been started in the pit to warm them and their dragons were huddled slightly closer than before. Snotlout and the twins had managed to growl out their first syllables in Dragonese and all the riders were more aware of their own dragons' strengths and weaknesses. There had been some arguments; some struggles for leadership â€“ unlike the dragons, the Vikings didn't really know Hiccup. Just as he had had

trouble trusting them with his secrets (and still didn't trust them with everything), they were having trouble trusting his knowledge.<p>

Hiccup supposed he was partly to blame for that. If they knew everything or even if they only knew what Fishlegs didâ€| He didn't think he wanted to tell them. But that meant he was subject to questions they wouldn't have asked if they had known exactly how long he'd been flying with dragons. Snotlout wanted to know how he knew where the nest was, and how \_long\_ he'd known where the nest was. Astrid wanted to know why so many dragons had agreed to help them, and where Hiccup had found them all. Even Ruffnut and Tuffnut had been relatively serious, asking tough questions that he struggled to answer without saying too much. Through it all, Fishlegs had remained mostly silent, deferring to Hiccup's leadership while still managing to add his own unique perspective.

It gave Hiccup a sense of relief to glance over at Fishlegs, to know the other teen understood his dilemma, and that he would support him whatever Hiccup said. It was a feeling Hiccup had known for so long, with Toothless at his back, but he'd never really thought about it when he considered other humans. It was nice.

The plan finally worked out, Hiccup led the other teens to Berk â€“ from here on out, it would be flight training. The battle was coming, and they would have to be ready for it.

\* \* \*

><p>By the time they flew to collect Fishlegs the next day, both Hiccup and Toothless were feeling worn out. There had been an extremely late raid, hours after the teens had left and even after both of them had decided to get some sleep. They had been woken by the urgent screams of a Nadder overhead, the screeches ringing out through the valley, and Hiccup hadn't bothered with a saddle or warmer clothes in his haste.<p>

Snow had still been falling, so Hiccup had been cold and wet throughout the raid and without the saddle he had had to work to keep himself centered on Toothless. There hadn't been any mishaps, but it was just another frustration to deal with. Toothless too had had his problems. With the thick wall of snow, it was difficult to see clearly and he had fired off fewer shots than usual, still incredibly accurate but far less often. Even a dragon's good night vision wasn't enough to penetrate the haze. Many of the Nightmares, on Hiccup's side at least, had spent their fire keeping their bodies lit, rather than using it as an attack. It had also been incredibly hard to identify friend from foe, despite the dragon fire lighting the night, and a lot of yelling had occurred, screams in Dragonese as friend accidentally approached friend instead of foe, and shouts in Norse from the Viking village that was under attack.

And, on top of all the difficulties, a dragon had died.

Hiccup wasn't appointing blame, not caring whether the dragon had been friend or foe, or who had brought him down â€“ a life had been lost and that was all that mattered.

The only good thing that had come from the chaos was that very few dragons had managed to scrap enough food to return to the Nest. With

all the collisions that had occurred, many dragons had been shaken from the queen's thrall, adding to the number that returned to the clearing.

As dawn had risen, the snow continuing to fall, but resuming its earlier gentle descent, the flock of dragons had slowly made its way back to Timberjack Island and Hiccup's clearing. Exhausted and spent, the entire group had landed haphazardly in the clearing, collapsing on top of each other and forming one giant pile of dragons. The heap generated more than enough warmth for the frail human in their midst, and Hiccup had fallen asleep curled against Toothless, Strangler curled under his arm, left foot extended and bumping into a random Nadder, a Whispering Death's long tail draped across both him and the Night Fury beside him.

Now, still tired and in a somewhat depressed mood, Hiccup, Toothless, and Meatlug landed in the Cove where Fishlegs was waiting eagerly.

His face fell instantly upon greeting them, quickly determining that they weren't as pleased to see him as he was to see them, especially when Meatlug only nudged him half-heartedly.

'\_What's wrong?\_' he growled out rapidly, eyes searching them.

Hiccup shook his head. '\_Long night,\_' he replied. '\_There was another raid.\_' Fishlegs didn't need to know about the dragon that had died.

'\_I could've-\_'

'\_There wasn't time for that,\_' Meatlug interrupted Fishlegs' offer, gently consoling her rider.

'\_There's nothing wrong,\_' Hiccup finally said. '\_We just didn't get much sleep. This is important though,\_' he continued before Fishlegs could offer to hold off on his training. '\_We're just gonna do things a little differently.\_'

Fishlegs studied his face, slipping into his saddle. '\_What?\_' he asked, perhaps a bit worriedly.

Toothless shook himself, giving the dragon of a grin, and Hiccup could feel his friend's mischievous spirit resurfacing. '\_Don't worry, it's going to be fun,\_' the Night Fury chirped, taking off with a burst of energy before Fishlegs could reply.

Hiccup laughed as they soared through the blue afternoon sky. It was amazing to see Toothless and Fishlegs interacting. His two friends finally adjusting to the other, the dragon joking around and playing with the Viking. As Toothless' initial burst of energy faded Meatlug caught up to them, Fishlegs looking more worried than before. Hiccup laughed again.

'\_Relax Fishlegs!\_' he growled once the teen got close enough.  
'\_Trust us, you'll enjoy it.\_'

It really wasn't anything bad. Fishlegs was probably the best flyer of the teens, even if he liked to play it safe. There wasn't too much

Hiccup wanted to work on with him. Instead he'd spoken with the dragons that had been in the clearing, and had convinced them to stay when Fishlegs got there, and play a giant game of Catch the Dragon. He wasn't expecting Fishlegs to start jumping off Meatlug midair any time soon, it would be a long while before that happened, but it would give the Viking an opportunity to work on maneuvering through the air, and help him and Meatlug be more in tune with each other.

The game would be relaxing, giving Hiccup and the dragons a much needed bit of fun and allowing him to see where Fishlegs need to improve at the same time. Two dragons with one axe, pardon the idiom.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Wow, alright, I guess you guys like Fishlegs. I had a great response to the last chapter, so thank you for that. We're nearing the end though, and it won't be long before the final confrontation. Next chapter should include the other teens' training, as well as maybe another raid. The Red Death's getting desperate.<strong>

\*\*Anyway, thanks again for all the amazing feedback. Let me know how this one went!\*\*

\*\*One last question - should I change the rating to T?)\*\*

## 15. The Calm Before

The first daytime raid Hiccup could ever remember happened, of course, when he was training with the Viking riders. Luckily, it was Fishlegs' day and Hiccup knew that his friend would follow his lead and not question any order he gave. (Snotlout would have been reluctant to listen to him, Astrid might have thought that she knew better even if she was learning that he knew a great deal about dragons, and the twins just wouldn't have listened plain and simple, but Fishlegsâ€œ If Hiccup could have planned for this, he'd have chosen Fishlegs.)

Hiccup was actually showing Fishlegs the fog that surrounded the nest, neither of them breaching it, when Mist â€œ the current dragon on watch â€œ came flying out of it. He didn't think anything would happen that would make his efforts necessary (Neither he nor Toothless were planning on going anywhere, and any dragon could find the nest), but he thought it might be a good idea to have at least one other human know where the nest was, just in case.

The Changewing halted when she saw them, shifting to fly alongside them. '\_There's a raid leaving the nest,\_' she growled out quickly.

Hiccup nodded immediately, and Toothless peeled away from her, Meatlug trailing behind.

'\_She's going to gather the others,\_' Hiccup shouted to Fishlegs over the wind. '\_They'll meet us there.\_'

There had been no need for words to convey that information, the

procedure for dragon raids had long since been determined. The five of them would never be enough to stop a raid on their own, but the dragons on Timberjack Island were always ready to join in. Still, since they were nearby, the two dragon and rider pairs would use their head start rather than waste time following Mist to gather reinforcements.

'\_I don't have any weapons!\_' Fishlegs growled back, slightly panicked.

Hiccup gestured to Meatlug as if to say 'you're on a dragon'. Fishlegs blushed slightly, looking down. He might have been nervous, but Hiccup was confident in his friend's ability. Fishlegs knew how to fight, even if he'd never done so atop a dragon, and Meatlug had come on raids before without her rider. They flew together very well â€“ there was no reason to think that they wouldn't fly together just as well.

Toothless monitored his speed, flying at a pace that Meatlug could keep up with, and it didn't take long for them to come up behind the flock of dragons making their way to a nearby Viking village. Diving straight into the crowd, Hiccup leaped off of Toothless, landing on a Nadder's wing (causing it to falter mid-flight) before jumping again onto a Nightmare. He always had to be careful with Monstrous Nightmares because they had a nasty habit of setting themselves on fire and this dragon was no exception. It instantly let the flames spread, leaving Hiccup no time to attack. Accepting the Nightmare as a lost cause, he jumped again before the flames could reach his boots, Toothless catching him in the saddle.

Fishlegs had managed to disorient a Gronckle while Hiccup had been busy and Toothless flew up beside Meatlug as the freed dragon quickly fled. By now the rest of the enslaved dragons had reached the village, the riders merely having ambushed the back of the pack, and now the real challenge would begin.

'\_You ready for this?\_' Hiccup asked Fishlegs.

The large boy gulped slightly, looking down at the chaos before them, and seemed to come to a decision. He met Hiccup's gaze and nodded once. Hiccup grinned in response and together they dove downward, entering the fray once more.

\* \* \*

><p>Less than a week later, Hiccup and Toothless soared through the air together, gliding just above the ocean as the noon sun shone from the cloudless sky above them. A week had passed since the Vikings had decided to start training. A night raid had occurred after his first training session with Astrid and Snotlout, and then Fishlegs had gotten the chance to participate in a raid when the dragons had attacked in broad daylight two days later. Fishlegs had handled the raid remarkably well, he and Meatlug making quite the team as they defended the current target of the queen's wrath. Today was another day with Astrid and Snotlout, there had been no raids last night and they weren't meeting with the Vikings for another two hours. With nothing to do but wait, dragon and rider had decided to take some time for themselves.</p>

They loved living on Timberjack Island, surrounded by old and new

friends, but sometimes it could seem a bit crowded. Being surrounded by dragons after so long of just the two of them, sneaking away together whenever they could steal a moment, was a bit overwhelming at times.

Now they glided just above a pod of Cauldrons below them, racing through the air as the other dragons swam through the sea. Once the dragons had realized they were only there to have fun, and weren't attempting to attack them or steal their food, they had eagerly joined in the game.

Racing over the ocean with Toothless, playing with wild dragons, Hiccup could feel his worries dissipating. With the salty water spraying in his face and the wind blowing through his hair, his best friend beneath him and the sun shining overhead, it was easy to forget all that had happened the past few months. And so much had happened.

It had all started with dragon training, but Hiccup could barely remember the dismay he'd felt when his father had told him he'd be participating. It felt like so long ago. That was when Hiccup had finally stepped up, and decided to do something about the problem that he'd known about for years. He hadn't exactly sat back and watched before â€“ he'd acted on the outskirts, defying the monster at the nest by attacking stray dragons she sent out, knocking dragons from her thrall. He'd even flown about a few of the raids on Berk, helping where he could, but he'd never done anything about his village's policy against dragons.

He had ignored the dragon training that other teenagers had gone through, avoiding the arena whenever he could. He hadn't wanted to think about the fact that, once a year, a dragon was killed there for nothing more than sport and boasting rights. But once he'd entered dragon training? Well he hadn't been able to ignore it any longer. Finally, he and Toothless had acted on the plans they'd discussed, moving to free the dragons â€“ and they'd succeeded. Again though, the worry he'd felt then, when he thought the Vikings might have known that he was responsible for opening the cages? It was absolutely nothing compared to what was happening now.

Even the joy he'd felt when he knew he'd gotten away with it, when Fishlegs and Astrid had joined him, even that memory was faint. Because immediately after that, Hiccup and Toothless had decided they weren't going to stop there, making a move against the queen with a plan they'd been discussing for months. That had been over a month ago, but it was what had started the worry that was present now. Many of the events that had happened had been that one single day â€“ their assault on the nest, Strangler appearing in the village, Hiccup's banishment, Fishlegs' and Astrid's decision to join him in his crusade, his decision to let them, Astrid finally accepting and naming the Nadder she'd chosen, and, finally, the attack that Hiccup and Toothless had weathered together.

Then had come the past month, the constant watch, the increased raids, his visit to Berk, his confrontation with his father, Snotlout and the twins â€“ everything leading to the same ending, a fight with the Red Death. The story was too impossible to have made up, Hiccup never could have dreamed of things happening the way they had. The only thing left to do was wait for the inevitable confrontation.

But right now, at this instant, there was nothing but the open sky ahead of them, no obstacles or challenges, just flight, pure and simple. Sometimes Hiccup wished that they could stay this way forever, just the two of them going anywhere they wanted without worry. Some things just weren't meant to be though. They parted ways with the Scauldrons eventually, knowing that the fun couldn't last, but it wouldn't take the full two hours to get back to Berk â€“ they had some time to relax.

In silence they flew to a small island nearby, nothing more than an outcropping of rock from the sea with only a few small trees and bushes, and settled down against each other. It was a chilly day but the sun was warm on their faces and the sea was calm in front of them. Toothless was the first to speak.

'\_It'll be any day now,\_' he growled calmly. The Red Death was panicking. Hiccup couldn't remember Berk ever experiencing a raid in the middle of the day. The dragons typically waited for the cover of night fall, hoping to catch villagers unaware. Not to mention, the dragons had been far fewer during the last raid. In her hunger, the queen was no doubt losing control of some of her followers, as well as eating others. Plus, Toothless and Hiccup had been waiting for each raid, knocking dragons from her thrall with ease.

The rider closed his eyes and took a deep breath, opening them again as he nodded. '\_Yeah.\_' It wouldn't be long.

There was another stretch of silence.

'\_Hey bud?\_' Hiccup asked, sitting up and turning to look his dragon in the face.

Toothless perked up slightly, replying by turning to face his human, his expression answer enough.

'\_Have you everâ€| have you ever seen \_anything\_ like this before?\_'

The Night Fury huffed, a sign of frustration, a dragon's denial, and shook his head, a human gesture he'd learned from Hiccup. They didn't talk about Toothless' past very often, but to be honest, he didn't have much of one. He was too young to have seen the world. '\_We can't make this about size,\_' he reminded Hiccup. '\_We have to outsmart her.\_'

'\_I know, I'm just, worried about the others.\_'

'\_The humans?\_' Toothless had warmed up to Fishlegs, and even Astrid a little, but he hadn't bothered to speak with the others and Hiccup wasn't sure he even wanted too.

'\_Everyone,\_' Hiccup corrected his friend. '\_Humans and dragons. I let them help because it's their fight too, it's everyone's fight. But a fight means thatâ€|\_'

Hiccup didn't have to continue, Toothless already knew. A fight meant that people were going to get hurt. A fight meant the possibility of people dying â€“ Vikings or dragons. Dragon and rider were still young, no matter how much they'd seen. They'd fought skirmishes before. They'd protected themselves and other dragons. They'd

survived every emotional battle that had been thrust upon them: Toothless' desperation at their first meeting, when he thought he'd never fly again; Hiccup's outcast status and the loneliness he'd gone through; their rejection by certain dragons who were appalled at the thought of a human rider; and most recently, Hiccup's banishment.

They were best friends. Unstoppable together. And they were making everything up as they reacted to the events around them. They'd never done anything like this before, they'd never planned a battle, they'd never taken down a tyrant dragon — how were they supposed to react? People, dragons and Vikings alike, were looking to them, but Hiccup and Toothless couldn't help but wonder if they were just going to get everyone killed.

'\_Her wings are going to be her weak spot,\_' Toothless finally said, breaking the silence that had fallen. They both knew that nothing good could come out of dwelling on what ifs. '\_We need to know if she can fly.\_'

Hiccup nodded, leaning back against the black dragon. '\_If she can't, that'll give us the advantage. If she can, well there's no way that she's faster than us.\_'

'\_Your bow could help,\_' Toothless commented.

Following his friend's line of thought instantly, Hiccup nodded again. '\_Six arrows, six eyes, it'll be a hard shot but if I can manage it\_'

'\_And remember, dragon scales are tough, our weakest points are eyes, ears, and when we open our mouths\_'

Distracting themselves from worrisome thoughts, they dove into a discussion of strategy: the best way to attack, how to approach, how to divide up the dragons and riders that would be accompanying them. Their relaxation time had been much needed, but they couldn't let it last. They couldn't get distracted and lose focus about what was in front of them, about how much they had to lose and how much they would gain if they won.

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><p>By the time Hiccup and Toothless gathered Stormfly and Snotlout's Nightmare — Hookfang, Snotlout had named him during his second training session — from Timberjack Island and made their way to the Cove, Astrid and Snotlout were already waiting for them. Hiccup didn't bother slipping from Toothless, merely nodding at the Vikings in greeting, and watched as Astrid spoke to Stormfly in passable Dragonese and Snotlout enthusiastically greeted his new friend.</p>

Of all the Vikings, Snotlout had surprised him the most. He'd been frightened and wary at first, like Astrid, but unlike Astrid, he'd warmed remarkably quickly to the idea of riding dragons. Maybe it was because he'd seen his fellow Vikings enjoy it, maybe he just didn't want to be shown up by the village exile. Whatever the reason, there was no doubt that Snotlout was fond of the Nightmare. They didn't always listen to each other, but that was because they were exactly the same — stubborn and slightly arrogant, always sure that they

were the one who was right. Toothless had commented, and Hiccup had agreed, that if dragon and rider were ever of the same mind, they would be a force to be reckoned with.

Now though, they had to work on getting there. He and Toothless took the two new riders to the sea stacks, the ultimate test of maneuverability, and prepared to show them how it was done. They wouldn't be able to handle the speed that Toothless was capable of, but if they could make it from one side to the other at a decent speed, it would be a good start.

Hiccup and Toothless demonstrated the course once, then sat back to watch the two Vikings and their dragons. Once Astrid thoroughly beat Snotlout, the brash Viking began to take the competition more seriously, halting his attempts at impressing Astrid in favor of trying to win.

Everyone had come so far from the Vikings that had hesitated to even touch a dragon — but would it be enough?

\* \* \*

><p>After Astrid and Snotlout returned to Berk, dragon and rider returned to Timberjack Island, but as the hours continued to pass, Hiccup's stress levels continued to climb. Even Toothless was getting restless, neither of them able to sit still for long periods of time. Any day now, any hour, any minute, the Red Death could leave her nest. What if they weren't ready? What if they were sleeping? What if they didn't notice? What if they were working with Ruffnut and Tuffnut tomorrow when it happened?</p>

Every hour of the day, Hiccup went over the plan again and again, talking it out with Toothless, mumbling to himself, wondering if there was anything, any small detail he could change that would somehow make things turn out better.

Completely aside from the timing of the attack, there was the matter of what would actually happen when they encountered the beast for the first time. Toothless' saddle was staying on at all times - Hiccup's bow and quiver replacing all but one saddle bag, which held a few medical supplies. The other dragons with riders, Meatlug, Stormfly, Hookfang, and the newly named Barf and Belch, had all also opted to remain saddled.

They had their orders to fly straight to Berk as soon as word arrived - which only gave Hiccup another thing to worry about. He and Toothless would be flying with the dragons to Berk, an unwelcome detour, simply because he was worried about how the villagers would react to four dragons flying in formation overhead. There would be no time to stop and talk to anybody, to tell them what was going on, but there would undoubtedly be questions and perhaps the Vikings would even attack.

Hiccup had realized that they couldn't risk time by landing somewhere unseen and allowing him to sneak into the village alone. They'd have to get the teens' attentions to move quickly, and in doing so they'd get the attention of the rest of Berk as well. It was a risk they'd have to take.

The rest of the dragons that would be accompanying them would be

waiting on the edge of the mist and together the group would breach the fog and attack the queen. While the riderless dragons worked to hold back any wild dragons still within the Red Death's control, Hiccup, Toothless, and the others would go straight for the queen herself. It was going to be hard. Sometimes Hiccup wondered if such a monster could even be beaten, but he had faith in Toothless and in their skills when they worked together. The plan would have to be enough; there wasn't any time to change it, no additional resources they could work with.

As for the actual fight " well Toothless had told him to treat the Red Death as he would any other dragon and Hiccup fully intended to do so. If they could blind her, disorient her with sound, then they might stand a chance. The killing shot though? Hiccup and Toothless had only come to one conclusion. No shot, no dragon fire, would be able to pierce her hide. Through the mouth was the only way to kill her, the only vulnerable spot that could be exploited. But the Red Death's mouth was also one of her most dangerous features. It was massive, providing a giant target, but she could suck in air and any dragon that got too close would be done for.

Finally, Hiccup decided enough was enough.

'We're not going to fight well if we exhaust ourselves worrying about it,' he said, putting a hand on Toothless to get his friend to stop fidgeting.

Toothless huffed in frustration and flopped down on the ground, angrily agreeing with his rider.

Despite the situation, Hiccup grinned at his friend's movements, sitting down in front of the Night Fury to stare him in the face. They had taken their moment to themselves earlier that day because they had figured it would be the last chance they would get. They needed to stay close now so that they would know any developments soon after they happened. There would be no more long relaxing flights until everything was over, no more exhaustive but calming flights through the sea stacks.

The anxious dragon grumbled at Hiccup's laughter, huffing again in just the right way to ruffle Hiccup's hair with his breath. The human's grin only widened.

'C'mon bud. We're both anxious-' his fingers were drumming up and down on his knee even as he spoke '- but it'll happen when it happens.'

Toothless stared back at him, tail twitching slightly. 'When did you turn into the voice of reason?'

'Oh, right about the time you started worrying too much.'

'I don't like just sitting around.'

And that was the problem. They had to keep up their energy, so there was no goofing around or training they could do. Hiccup's arrows had been sharpened to perfection. The saddle was as comfortable as it was going to get. They'd gone over the plan with the other dragons already, multiple times. Simply put, there was nothing to do and the normally active dragon wasn't enjoying himself.

Hiccup smiled sympathetically. 'I know,' he said. He wasn't too fond of it himself either, but at least he had the option to pull out a sketchbook or maybe take up whittling again (though maybe not, a knife in his thumb wouldn't help anybody but the Red Death right now). '\_What about...\_' he paused, trying to think of a topic to discuss. '\_What about when this is all over?\_'

Toothless blinked. There was a long pause as both of them contemplated the question. What about when it was all over? They'd never even really considered it. If, or hopefully when the Red Death was vanquished, what then?

There would be no need for the community on Timberjack Island. The dragons would be free to do as they pleased, to go where they wanted. Different species weren't meant to be cooped up as they were; it wouldn't take long for Hiccup and Toothless to be on their own again.

But there would still be at least four other dragons left: Meatlug, Stormfly, Hookfang, Barf and Belch - what would they do? Would they take the Cove as their home, meeting in secret with their riders as Hiccup had met with Toothless all those years? Or would the Vikings want to do away with the secrecy, to prove to the Berkians that they didn't have to be afraid of the dragons?

Would Hiccup want to be the one to show them?

He didn't know if he could just leave Berk without making things up with his father, without saying goodbye to Gobber. He didn't know if he could stay either.

Dragon and rider locked gazes, each of them aware of what the other was thinking: would they stay? Or would they leave?

'\_I'm thinking a nap,\_' Toothless finally said. '\_Maybe find that hot spring from last winter again.\_'

Hiccup nodded, moving his mind away from the difficult thoughts. '\_If there's no snow we could go to the dragon nip field. Or, when was the last time we flew at night â€“ we haven't seen the aurora in a while.\_'

'\_There's that cave system we haven't explored yet.\_'

'\_And that species of dragon we saw that wasn't in the book.\_'

'\_Not to mention you need to improve your armor.\_'

'\_Oh yeah, and there was that flight suit I wanted to work on.\_'

Toothless huffed, slightly amused. '\_You, flying? There's no way that could go wrong.\_'

'\_Oh please, flying's just like falling, isn't it?\_'

'\_Not even close.\_'

As they spoke, Toothless' tail slowed its twitching and Hiccup's

fingers began to still. Together they distracted each other from their mutual worrying, talking about better times and a bright future. With nothing left to do but wait, they knew that they couldn't remain pessimistic â€“ it would only ruin the mood for when the fight actually happened.

\* \* \*

><p>When word came the next day, not long after noon, Hiccup and Toothless were sitting near the fire talking with all the dragons from the arena. They'd just finished their lunch and Hiccup had posed the question to them about what happened next, after the battle was over and done with. All the dragons with riders were adamant about staying near Berk, no matter what the other Vikings thought of them, and even Strangler surprised Hiccup by saying that he was going to stick around with the two of them.</p>

'\_We don't know what we're going to do yet,\_' Hiccup reminded the Terror. '\_We might leave Berk.\_'

Strangler shook his head in a gesture of stubbornness, but he didn't get the chance to speak. A dragon's scream rang out from above them, the Nightmare who'd been on watch circling overhead, and everybody instantly knew what that meant.

Hiccup sprang into action, slipping into the saddle before he'd even stood up fully and within seconds they were airborne â€“ a black streak in the sky as the other dragons took off behind them. Toothless slowed immediately as the group split into two, still flying quickly but not wasting all his speed on the journey to Berk. Only the four other saddled dragons were behind them, the others having split off already, but it would still be a few minutes before they made it to the village. How far could the queen get in the time it took them to arrive? Was she capable of taking flight and leaving the nest? There was no point in worrying, they'd just have to deal with what happened when they got there and trust that their companions were capable of taking care of themselves.

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><p><strong>AN: Bit of a filler chapter (and you had to wait so long too - sorry!) but an anonymous reviewer commented that Toothless hasn't gotten much screen time lately and I thoroughly agreed. I'd been meaning to write some Hiccup-Toothless scenes and the moments before the battle seemed to be the best place for them. The good news - next chapter the action starts. We're approaching the end folks.</strong>

\*\*The simply amazing news - this story has 200 reviews, over 400 favorites, and over 500 follows - which is quite frankly, simply unbelievable. Thank you so much for all your support. \*\*

## 16. The Storm

As Berk came into view, Toothless voiced the scream of a Night Fury, firing a bolt of his purple lighting so that it exploded just above the village. Hiccup's vision wasn't quite good enough to see any details just yet, but he could picture in his mind the shouts of the villagers and the slamming of doors as they ran outside in a hurry.

Berk had never experienced a raid in the middle of the day and the legendary Night Fury scream had only ever been heard during the night when the blackness of the sky ensured the dragon wouldn't be seen. The Vikings were no doubt simultaneously worried about a raid, eager for battle, and curious as to whether or not they would catch a glimpse of the black dragon. Hiccup didn't plan on giving them much of a chance to look.

The other dragons followed suit, crying out loudly after Toothless. Now Hiccup was close enough to see the villagers. They were running amok, weapons flying, caught off guard by the approaching dragons. Toothless and the others dove, going in for a quick and fast landing, and the lone rider managed to spot the other teens, running together toward Berk's central clearing.

An axe was flung toward the dragons that Hookfang easily dodged, the large dragon surging forward and lighting himself aflame to clear their path. The Vikings scattered as the flaming dragon landed, and Hiccup and Toothless circled overhead as Meatlug, Stormfly, and Barf and Belch landed by the Nightmare.

Screams filled the air â€“ calls to battle and shock at the Night Fury circling above. Hiccup could tell the moment he'd been spotted atop the dragon simply from the change in the tone of those below him. It was the second time the Vikings had seen him and Toothless together and he wondered what they thought. He hadn't bothered to ask the teens what the villagers had done after his last visit, too worried about being disappointed by his father's reaction, or even Gobber's. Now the reaction seemed to be primarily confusion.

He was a traitor to the village, but he had been the chief's son. Dragons were their sworn enemy, but Toothless had saved Stoick's life last time he'd been in town. And it wasn't as if a raid was occurring â€“ there were only five dragons and even the Vikings wouldn't be able to convince themselves that they were actually attacking.

Not to mention, now they had their proof that Toothless was indeed a Night Fury. To see Hiccup atop the most feared dragon in the village, knowing that he had been the first to ever set eyes on the legendâ€¦ well it was bound to be even more of a shock than last time, when they hadn't known for certain that Toothless belonged to the elusive species. Having fired his characteristic purple lightening above the village had eliminated any doubt.

The Viking's hesitation was brief though and eventually they moved forward to rid Berk of the unwanted visitors. Toothless easily dodged a hammer thrown his way just as Stormfly let fly some of her spikes, discouraging one Viking from moving any closer. Meatlug knocked down another with her club-like tail and Hookfang finally extinguished his flames. Aware of the mounting tension, Barf began to spew gas, filling the center clearing just as the Viking teenagers reached it.

"Is it time?" Astrid's voice rang strong and clear from inside the gas cloud.

Though Hiccup figured it was mostly a rhetorical question, he answered anyway. "It's time," he responded loudly as the dragons rose up.

Not bothering to ignite the gas left behind, the warriors sped away from Berk, away from the shouts and cries from the villagers. No doubt some Berkians were worried that their children had been kidnapped, snatched up by their worst enemies in a strange raid that had come in the middle of the day, but Hiccup knew that some of them would figure it out.

He'd already been seen on Toothless twice now - the question remained: did they think he'd convinced the rest of the teens to become traitors and join him in exile or would they start to wonder if dragons weren't so bad after all? They didn't know anything about the dragons being controlled, but they did know of Astrid's and even Snotlout's dedication to fighting dragons. What would they trust more â€“ their hatred of their enemies, or their fellow villagers who had fought said enemies alongside them?

Hiccup didn't know if he'd live to see his questions answered, but he spent no more time pondering it. If he wasn't focused, if he let his concentration slipâ€œ! One blow from the Red Death was likely more than enough to remove him and Toothless from the playing field. He might or might not live to see the future, but what he needed to pay attention to now was the present.

\* \* \*

><p>The start of the mist wasn't too far from Berk but as they approached its usual boundary line, Hiccup was surprised â€“ and pleased â€“ to see that it was much further back than usual. The exposed sea stacks looked bare without the fog surrounding them but none of the eleven warriors had much time to study them as they sped by.</p>

Upon leaving Berk they had quickly adopted their agreed upon formation, a small V shape, with Toothless and Hiccup as the point up front. As the two slowest dragons, Meatlug and Barf and Belch took up the rear, guarding their backs. That left Stormfly to Hiccup's right and Hookfang to his left, between Toothless and the rear guard.

They flew into the fog swiftly and steadily, mostly silent, but unlike last time Hiccup had attacked the nest he felt the need to reassure his companions. As eager as they were for battle, the Viking teens had never done anything like this before, and they'd barely participated in any raids.

"Stay close," he reminded them in Norse, the dragons tightening the formation as they flew as close to each other as possible. "We have the advantage of surprise â€“ the dragons won't be expecting us." Hiccup didn't look behind him to see their reactions but he spotted Astrid's nod from the corner of his eye. They were as prepared as they would ever be.

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><p>They hadn't gotten far into the fog before the riderless dragons joined up with them, as planned. Ripwing led a small V formation, slightly above and to the left of Hiccup's group. Midnight led another, above and to the right. Blizzard's group was below and to the right, while Mist's group was below and to the left. As silently as possible, dragon after dragon joined them until they had a veritable horde, Hiccup and Toothless leading the way.</p>

No matter how silent each dragon flew though, it was hard to mask the sound of an army.

By the time they'd cleared the fog and the nest had become visible, it was clear the Red Death had realized they were coming. She was standing on the beach, a giant hole in the mountain behind her, staring straight at the approaching dragons. No matter how many times Hiccup had seen her giant head filling the hole in the nest, he never could have pictured the sight that lay before them.

The dragon standing on the beach was massive, rough blue scales tinged with red coating her hide. For the first time Hiccup and Toothless saw the giant spiked club that made up the tail and the spikes that lined the back of the Red Death. They took in the folded wings, unsure if the beast would be able to use them, and the sharp talons that gave them a reason to avoid flying too close to her feet. The head was exactly as they remembered it — though somehow it seemed larger out here in the open, as opposed to when it had been confined in the mountain — with three eyes on either side and huge nostrils designed for smelling her prey. Even in the unlikely event that Hiccup made all six shots and blinded her, anyone who got too close would still easily be noticed by scent alone.

The world seemed to hesitate, neither side moving forward, and Hiccup took advantage of the stillness, firing off an arrow as quickly as he was able. He fired a second immediately after but as soon as the first had hit its target both sides had leapt into action.

The Red Death roared in agony as one of her eyes was pierced, her scaly eyelid immediately breaking off the arrow embedded in her eye as she blinked at the pain, and the beast reared up on her hind legs slightly, commanding her slaves. The dragons surrounding Hiccup surged upward and forward to meet the small number of dragons still under the Red Death's thrall (at least, small compared to the armada she'd previously controlled) and the sky was filled with dragon fire as the two armies clashed.

Toothless dodged a stray Nadder's spikes as Hiccup loosed another arrow, blinding a second eye on their enemy's right side.

There was another roar and fire poured out of the massive dragon's maw, the six riders and their five dragons scattering to evade her fury. Hiccup would have difficultly surprising her with a third arrow, but they'd planned for that. They'd known that if she was intelligent enough to know what he was trying to do, she would try to stop him.

The dragon rider nudged his friend slightly and Toothless swerved again, making his way back towards where the other riders were regrouping.

"Nothing you throw at her is gonna get past those scales!" Hiccup reminded his friends, shouting over the chaos from above them. "You need to distract her — make sure she doesn't know which way to turn! Like we planned it!"

Until now, the teens had mostly hung back, frightened and awestruck by their first glance of the monster who'd ruined so many lives, but now they nodded. In all seriousness, this was likely the most

important moment of their lives, and definitely the most dangerous. Hiccup was glad to see that even the twins seemed to be exercising razor sharp focus.

With the pep talk over, Toothless dove back toward the Red Death, forcing her head to turn as he flew by and struck her with a bolt of lightning. The instant she righted herself Hookfang was there, shooting a stream of fire that, if not painful, was at the very least annoying, forcing the beast to close her eyes.

As she turned toward Snotlout and Hookfang, opening her mouth (whether to roast them or suck them in Hiccup could only guess), the twins took their turn. Barf and Belch dove from overhead, spewing gas that blocked any view of Hookfang and his rider, and the queen abruptly stopped her attack to close her mouth again before she swallowed the gas. One spark later and the resulting explosion knocked the Red Death's head to the side again, giving the dragons and their riders a chance to retreat a safe distance.

Hiccup and Astrid teamed up to take advantage of the distraction; they were on the other, partially blinded, side of the beast, and one well-placed arrow from Hiccup and several of Stormfly's spikes were more than enough to finish the job. As she roared in frustration again, now thoroughly blinded on one side, Fishlegs and Meatlug took advantage of her distracted state to pelt her with fireballs. The Red Death retaliated by blinding swinging her tail around, seemingly uncaring of what she bumped into as long as she disposed of the pests who were bothering her.

Fast enough to dodge the monstrous club but not quite fast enough to dodge the wind that came with it, Meatlug spiraled out of control slightly, crash landing on the ground with Fishlegs still safely on her back. Hiccup didn't want to get distracted but concern for his friends had him nudging Toothless in their direction and his Night Fury swooped by overhead, taking just long enough for them to see that dragon and rider were dazed but unharmed.

In the meantime, the other three riders had continued their attack and Toothless circled back around just as the Red Death attempted to suck Barf, Belch, and the twins into her gaping maw. Astrid directed Stormfly to let loose another round of spikes into the queen's mouth as Snotlout and Hookfang spewed fire into her already blinded eyes. Still, the queen didn't pause, and Toothless dove forward, firing another lightning bolt that once more forced the beast to turn her head and stop her attack.

Ruffnut and Tuffnut went the way of Fishlegs, tumbling to the ground dazed but safe, and Hiccup knew it would be a while before Barf and Belch were up to flying again after the strain of fighting to escape the vacuum the Red Death had created. It was down to the three of them and Hiccup wasn't sure if he'd be able to blind the beast completely.

'\_Let's see if she can use those wings buddy,\_' he murmured quietly, leaning over to speak in Toothless' ear. Better not to continue to risk the chance of others getting hurt and instead take on the beast themselves.

His friend growled his agreement, the two of them diving to the side as Hookfang and Stormfly dodged the scorching heat of the monster's

fire, sufficiently keeping her distracted. As the other two dragons continued to dance around her head, Hiccup and Toothless hit her from the side, once, twice, three times in rapid succession before passing above her expansive back to loop around and hit her other side.

The Red Death roared in frustration again, ignoring the two pests bothering her in favor of trying to spot Hiccup and Toothless. But they were on her blind side now, pelting her other wing, and no matter how much she turned her head she wouldn't be able to see them. Left with no other options, the monstrous dragon lifted her feet, turning ever so slowly and extending her wings as she did so.

'This is it,' Hiccup thought to himself, he and Toothless dodging the blast of wind that came with the first flap of the beast's wings, 'now we'll see if she can fly.'

\* \* \*

><p>It took time, especially given the Red Death's previously motionless state, but before long the monstrous dragon was indeed in the air, spinning to face Toothless and Hiccup. Dragon and rider surged forward, speeding away from the island. They both knew they would need space to maneuver but with the fight still ongoing above them the only way they would get that space would be if they left everybody else behind. It would be all too easy for the Red Death to barrel through the clashing armies, uncaring who fought for her and who fought against her.</p>

Despite their head start though, the monster wasn't far behind them, her massive wings propelling her forward faster than Hiccup had anticipated. Toothless stayed low for the moment, weaving through the sea stacks in an effort to slow her down, but she barreled through those without thought, seemingly not noticing the obstacles in her path.

Hiccup nudged his friend lightly, the small movement reminding the dragon that their enemy was blind on one side, and Toothless banked, turning in a move that would take advantage of that. The queen roared again, spewing fire blindly, and the Night Fury finally surged upward to avoid the scorching blow.

'\_The stacks aren't working, maybe we can lose her in the clouds,\_' Hiccup suggested, leaning over to murmur in his friend's ear again and encouraging Toothless to continue his upward climb. Their small size and dark coloring would hopefully make them hard to see in the dark clouds that had hovered over the battle. Whether a side effect of the mist or simply that day's weather Hiccup didn't know but he planned to take advantage of the cover.

Without hesitation the Red Death followed them upward, roaring yet again in fury as they disappeared from her sight in the dark clouds. She spewed fire indiscriminately, no doubt hoping to roast them, but Toothless easily swung around the scorching flame, pelting the queen's side with yet another of his signature lighting blasts. Despite the ease at which they circled the monster though, Hiccup and Toothless were both well aware that they couldn't keep up their dance forever. All the lightning bolts in the world wouldn't be enough to bring the Red Death down and eventually the scorching flames would find them. They needed to end this soon, before they were too exhausted to dodge properly.

As the scorching flames abated, Toothless maneuvered his way to the front of the Red Death, prepared to shoot his lightning the next time she tried to roast them. The timing of their next move was critical, and they had to confront the monster head on in order to succeed. A lightning bolt in the mouth would no doubt be painful, but it wouldn't be fatal â€“ not unless her mouth was filled with the explosive gas that signaled her own attack.

The Red Death surged forward, attempting to swallow them whole, and, instead of dodging to the side, they surged forward, forcing the beast to follow them yet again. Finally they heard the sound of the gas building up yet again. Waiting until the last possible second, when as much gas as possible had accumulated in the beast's mouth, they turned, firing one last shot at the dragon that had ruined so many lives.

There was a momentary pause as the fire raced through the Red Death's gut, tearing her insides apart, and the massive wings faltered. Hiccup and Toothless stopped their own forward flight, circling back around to watch the Red Death crumple, heading for the ground below. Caught up in their victory, it took the two a moment to notice that the beast was indeed heading for the ground â€“ somehow in all their twists and turns they had made their way back to the nest, no longer above the sea.

'\_The others!\_' Hiccup cried out immediately, urging Toothless downward. His Night Fury instantly caught on to Hiccup's worry. When the Red Death landed she would turn into nothing more than ash and fire and any human beneath her would share the same fate. Even a dragon's protective scales wouldn't be able to let them survive such an explosion unscathed.

Diving straight down they sped past the burning monster, spotting their friends on the ground. It seemed that Astrid, Stormfly, Snotlout, and Hookfang had joined the other dragons in battling the Red Death's slaves, but Fishlegs, Meatlug, Ruffnut, Tuffnut, and Barf and Belch still rested on the beach, regaining their strength. The Zippelback and his riders were far enough away that Hiccup didn't worry too much about them, but it seemed that Meatlug had just realized the danger she and Fishlegs were in, barely having made it off the ground.

Toothless had already spotted them, straitening his flight as they traveled at frighteningly high speeds towards their friends. He positioned himself directly behind Meatlug, ramming the slower dragon slightly from behind to give her a burst of speed. It worked, Meatlug putting on a final burst of speed, but the sudden change in momentum as Toothless slowed jolted Hiccup from the saddle, sending him flying over his friend's head.

Reacting instantly, Toothless surged forward again, grabbing the falling rider in his claws and tucking his wings around him as they crashed, skidding through the dirt below. Knowing what was about to come, Toothless held tighter and braced himself as what was left of the Red Death hit the ground with a concussive force. A distance away (but not far enough in Toothless' mind) a massive fireball erupted into the sky, ash clouding the immediate area as debris from the ground began to pelt the downed dragon.

\* \* \*

><p>When Hiccup next opened his eyes he was greeted with a sheet of black in front of him. Unfocused and working through the pain of the impact it took him a moment to realize that he wasn't blind but was in fact cocooned in Toothless' embrace. He shifted in the dragon's tight grasp, unable to stop the groan that escaped him, and reached forward to weakly knock on his friend's wing.</p>

'\_Toothless?\_' he crooned, knowing it was doubtful the weak sound would carry to his friend's ears.

Still, Toothless must have felt his movements and the wing lifted, allowing Hiccup to see the destruction that lay before them. Squinting at the sudden influx of light, Hiccup took in the cloud of ash that blanketed the ground, making it hard to see far in any direction.

'\_Toothless?\_' he repeated, louder than before. He knew the position they were in couldn't be comfortable for his friend but his battered body didn't feel like moving at the moment.

The dragon beneath him purred wordlessly, the exhausted sound conveying both his pain and his satisfaction at their accomplishment. They had done it. They had defeated the Red Death, ended her thrall on the dragons, and, as far as they knew, none of their friends had been badly injured. The only question that remained was how injured they were.

Hiccup's whole body ached from the impact with the ground, but other than feeling like one giant bruise he seemed to be unharmed. The Night Fury's scales had shielded him from any heat the explosion had produced as well as all the debris that had no doubt been flung up by the impact. He would be sore for some time, but he'd be fine. Mustering up his strength, he crawled away from Toothless, sitting back on his feet as he knelt at his friend's side. Toothless took a moment, then he too shifted, pulling his wing out from under him and collapsing to the ground on his belly, wings splayed out on either side.

While they adjusted themselves there was a faint cry in the distance, calling for Hiccup, but the rider couldn't quite muster up the strength to reply. The others would find them eventually.

Shifting forward on his knees, not quite ready to stand yet, Hiccup made his way back to Toothless' side. The dragon crooned softly, moving his head to stare at Hiccup with his large, expressive eyes, and the rider placed a hand on his friend's head.

'\_I'm alright bud,\_' he murmured softly, silently thanking him. His eyes moved toward the ruined saddle on the Night Fury's back. '\_Let's get this off you.\_'

Satisfied that, for now, all was right, Toothless closed his eyes, resting his head on the ground once more as he let Hiccup take care of him. Already beginning to recover his strength, Hiccup's fingers moved as quickly as they were able, pulling apart the scraps of leather and metal and tossing them aside. He had just finished his task, collapsing against his exhausted friend and closing his own eyes, when Fishlegs' voice rang out from above him.

"Hiccup!"

The rider in question took a deep breath, then opened his eyes again, squinting at his friend standing above him.

'I'm alright,' he managed to growl out, sitting up slightly.

"Hiccup!" Relief echoed through Fishlegs' voice as he stood above Hiccup. 'I thought we thought well, we didn't know what happened.'Â'

Fishlegs' stuttered attempt at Dragonese reminded Hiccup of those who had journeyed with them and he looked around. Meatlug was right beside Fishlegs, both of them seemingly unharmed. Further behind them were the rest of the riders, each flanked by their dragon. Everyone was alright. The only question was, where did they go from here?

Hiccup looked over his group of friends (for that was what they had become, after today nothing would ever be the same again) and made his decision.

"Snotlout," he called out, getting his cousin's attention.

Snotlout started at being called out, curiosity written all over his face, and made his way over to Hiccup, standing beside Fishlegs.

Mustering his strength, Hiccup met the Viking's gaze. "We both know that with me gone, you're the next in line to be chief, so whatever happens next I'm leaving it up to you. This isn't my decision any more. But I will tell you two things: one, the choice you make will affect you, and them," he nodded in the direction of the other four Vikings and their dragons, "for the rest of your lives, so choose wisely; and two, a good chief listens to his people, so go talk to them, decide as a group."

Unusually serious, Snotlout nodded, and Hiccup could tell he was determined to do the right thing. Finding out what Hiccup was capable of had changed Snotlout, from the moment he'd first seen the outcast on a Night Fury to battling alongside him against a monstrous beast. The Viking was still reckless and arrogant, always trying to impress people, but he listened and cooperated more. He seemed to realize that the world didn't revolve around him and you never knew what hidden talents people had.

Snotlout made his way back to the group. "We need to tell the village the truth," he declared. "We need to tell them that they'll never again be attacked by dragons." Here he looked fondly over at Hookfang, speaking a bit softer than before. "And that dragons are our friends. Who agrees with me?"

As the group got into the discussion, Hiccup closed his eyes again, eager to rest for a moment.

"Hiccup," Fishlegs said quietly, getting his attention. "Aren't you going to??" he trailed off, gesturing toward the discussing group.

The dragon rider in question looked over at the group, marveling at the fact that they listened to him now, that they wanted to include him, and knew that whatever decision Snotlout came too, these five Vikings would remain his friends. "It's not my decision to make," he said quietly, smiling up at his friend.

Fishlegs hesitated, but seemed to understand that Hiccup had made his own decision. He and Meatlug moved over to join the discussion.

As dragons continued to gather around the group, old friends and new ones among them, Hiccup and Toothless closed their eyes and slept together, watched over by those they had begun to trust.

## 17. Back to Berk

When Hiccup was shaken awake by Fishlegs a few moments later it was clear that the group had come to a decision. Fishlegs took a step back, unusually solemn, and his expression was echoed by the other Vikings that formed a half circle around rider and Night Fury. Closing his eyes briefly to gather his strength, Hiccup winced as he stood, finally taking the time to look over his companions.

Fishlegs, Ruffnut, and Tuffnut were uninjured, having been taken out of the fight early, but Astrid had a scratch on her upper left arm, likely from a Nadder's spike, and Snotlout was missing a shoe. Judging from the state of his injury, said shoe had probably caught on fire. Behind them were many dragons in various states of health. Most of them had fled, finally free to live their lives as they choose, no longer needing to remain cooped up together for safety, but the ones Hiccup knew by name and several others that were injured had remained.

"Before you say anything," he finally said, moving his gaze back to the Vikings who had been silently waiting for him, "we should first head back to Timberjack Island. Tend to the injuries. Then you can follow through with whatever plan you've come up with."

"Are you injured?" Fishlegs asked, stepping forward with concern in his voice.

Hiccup was pretty sure he'd already answered that question, but he couldn't quite remember. "We'll probably be one giant bruise for a while," he answered for himself and Toothless, "but we'll be alright. Still," he turned toward Astrid and Snotlout, "you should probably treat those injuries." He could tell that Snotlout was keeping most of his weight off his slightly singed foot.

The Vikings exchanged glances, nodding in agreement. Behind him, Toothless heaved himself to his feet, preparing for flight. As the others turned toward their own dragons, Hiccup looked down at his best friend.

'\_Oh no, not a chance bud,\_' he said at Toothless' gesture to hop on.  
'Not after that stunt you just pulled. You need to fly easy for a while, keep weight off your wings. Ripwing can give me a ride back.\_'

Toothless snorted, as though Hiccup's statement was complete nonsense. '\_Like you weigh anything,\_' he retaliated. '\_I'm not letting you out of my sight.\_'

Shaking his head slightly in exasperation, Hiccup let a tired but fond smile cross his face. If he was absolutely honest with himself, he didn't particularly want to ride Ripwing either. After everything that had just happened the familiarity of moving through the sky with his best friend, held aloft by a Night Fury's strong wings, would be extremely comforting. Knowing he had won, Toothless shifted again, ruffling his wings in an impatient gesture. Seeing that everyone else had already climbed into their saddles Hiccup gave in. With perhaps less grace than he normally had, the teen moved forward, sliding onto his friend's bare back.

\* \* \*

><p>The flight back to Timberjack Island took far longer than it normally did, not just because Toothless was flying slower but also because the group as a whole was mindful of the injured dragons that would have struggled to fly at normal speeds. Thankfully, though several dragons had been hurt, none of the injuries were severe enough to keep any of them grounded. Hiccup's group had held back slightly, aware that once the fight was done their enemies would become their allies, and the enslaved dragons hadn't been at full strength either, caught in the daze that came with being under the control of the Red Death. Still, Hiccup was grateful that he had been hoarding herbs and making ointments the past month â€“ he would need them.</p>

Finally the island came into view and the dragons slowly glided down to land in the clearing. Midnight's children and other young and injured dragons who had stayed behind were quick to greet them, squawking with joy. Toothless landed gingerly, only halfheartedly folding his wings.

'\_Go get some rest,\_' Hiccup mumbled to his best friend, slipping off the Night Fury's back even as he leaned on him for support.

'\_I can rest right here,\_' Toothless replied, carefully lowering his weight to the ground and closing his eyes.

Smiling fondly, Hiccup pushed off of the black dragon, standing up straight. His priority was the injured and he quickly noted which injuries were the most severe and who among them had hung back, flying the slowest. Said dragons slumped down after the flight, collapsing on the ground in relief, and he mentally ordered them from most to least urgent. There was also, of course, Astrid and Snotlout to deal with. Astrid's injury could probably wait, she could probably even take care of it herself, but Snotlout needed to stay off his foot.

It was a sign of how exhausted Snotlout was that he didn't protest when Hiccup told him so, claiming he could handle it or some other such nonsense, and instead moved immediately to one of the benches around the fire with a halfhearted nod.

When he saw what Hiccup was doing Fishlegs immediately stopped in the process of removing Meatlug's saddle and came over to Hiccup. '\_I can go get the medicine,\_' he said, '\_what do you need?\_'

Not about to turn down the offer, Hiccup told him, this time specifying exactly which bags Fishlegs would have to go through. As the large Viking trotted off to the lean-to, Hiccup turned to Ruffnut and Tuffnut, who had just finished taking the saddles off their own dragon. "Ruffnut, Tuffnut," he called out, grabbing their attention. "Why don't you help Hookfang and Stormfly get their saddles off."

Astrid moved to protest but stopped at Hiccup's raised eyebrow. Stormfly's saddle was above her head and there was no point in reopening her wound by straining her arms. She watched Ruffnut and Tuffnut work for a moment, gaze softening as she stared at her dragon, and then turned back toward him.

"You did it Hiccup. You defeated the Red Death," she said softly, staring at him with no small measure of awe and astonishment.

Hiccup glanced over at her, pausing for a moment to consider her words, before he shook his head slightly. "No Astrid, we did it," he emphasized lightly, turning to gaze significantly at his best friend. "Humans and dragons."

Astrid frowned slightly. "No that's notâ€¦" She glanced over at Stormfly again, a frustrated look on her face. "I meant that you did this Hiccup. You were the first one of us, the first human," she corrected herself, apparently realizing that Hiccup no longer considered himself to be one of them, a Viking, "to even consider that this, this friendship, was possible. And you would have done this without of us, if none of us had been able to admit that you were right."

Next to her, Ruffnut and Tuffnut â€“ standing so close together their arms were practically linked and being unusually cooperative with each other â€“ nodded in agreement. Even Snotlout seemed to agree with Astrid's words. And as Fishlegs came back with the supplies he too nodded as well.

"She's right Hiccup," he added. "Without you, Vikings and dragons would have gone on hating each other."

Hiccup didn't know what to say. As far as he knew, they were right â€“ he couldn't think of a single other Viking who would have hesitated before killing a dragon, let alone paused long enough to befriend one â€“ but he'd never done well with praise. Especially considering the fact that he rarely received it from humans.

He shook his head, a fond smile on his face as he considered his human friends. "Maybe," he conceded, "but I couldn't have done it without Toothless. It takes two to form a friendship." And when each Viking before him turned to look at their dragons at his words he knew that he had spoken correctly. These Vikings had formed lasting friendships with dragons and their world would never be the same. Maybe that was thanks to him, but it was the group together who would bring about change in the future.

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup's aching body interrupted the moment, reminding him of the injuries that still needed to be treated, and he quickly set to work.

Thankfully he had enough supplies to divide up between the humans' and dragons' most serious injuries, leaving only the more minor scratches unattended. Knowing that he himself shouldn't move too much he instead sat down next to Snotlout, divvying up the tasks among the others.<p>

While he didn't quite trust Ruffnut and Tuffnut to bandage dragons that were not their own, they were more than capable of rubbing ointment into the wounds, allowing Fishlegs to trail behind them and wrap the injury with bandages when they were done. Astrid he told to bandage her own wound, given that her left arm had been scratched and she was right handed. When she was done with that she could help Fishlegs, trying not to move her arm too much. Meanwhile Hiccup set about treating Snotlout's injury, not wanting the Viking in question to put weight on his foot until he determined how bad the burn was.

It was only after the gang finished bandaging all the injuries that Hiccup finally looked up at the sky and realized how much time had passed. It wasn't quite dusk yet but it was fast approaching. He sent an apologetic smile in the direction of the other riders. "Sorry guys, I didn't mean to interrupt your plans or anything."

Fishlegs waved his concerns aside even as Astrid rolled her eyes at him. "It needed to be done," she reminded him.

"It's not a big deal," Snotlout added with his usual false self-confidence. He hesitated briefly. "Besides, we should uhâ€œ we should probably go over the plan again anyway."

Hiccup knew it was as close as Snotlout would ever get to asking for his opinion.

Dragons tended to, the humans on the island moved to gather around the empty fire pit. Snotlout was the first to speak up, starting off with his usual bravado before fading into a more genuine confidence, and the others spoke up periodically, adding in a detail here or there.

When it was all said and done, Hiccup paused to consider the plan. They had even made two slightly different versions of it, in case he hadn't wanted to accompany them back to Berk, something he wouldn't have expected from them. It was actually a very decent plan and, with a few tweaks here and there, the group gathered up their props, saddled their dragons once more, and took off for Berk. They had considered waiting until morning, to give everyone â€“ dragons and riders alike â€“ more time to rest, but ultimately decided against it. They didn't want the Vikings to start sending out search parties for them.

They flew slow, landing in a spot where they wouldn't be spotted by any villagers but close enough that they wouldn't have to walk too far, and sent the dragons to Hiccup's Cove. No point in putting their friends in any unnecessary danger, knowing that Vikings tended to hit first and ask questions never. (Secretly Hiccup knew that Toothless would not be going as far away as the Cove, but he didn't try to persuade his friend to do otherwise).

Before they sent the dragons off on their own though they first gathered their necessary props, gearing up for their hike into

Berk.

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup was more than willing to bet that they cut an imposing figure as they entered the village together. Darkness was beginning to fall, although the sun hadn't set quite yet, and there was just enough light for the villagers to know exactly who they were looking at. Snotlout lead the group, battle axe strapped to his back and a stout stick in his hand that took his weight every other step, drawing attention to his foot swathed in bandages. Astrid was at his right hand, his second in command. Her own battle axe was in her right hand, her upper left arm also covered in a thin coat of bandages.</p>

At Snotlout's left was Hiccup, the village outcast who wasn't quite a part of the group but still held a valued position. He had strapped his short sword to his belt in place of his usual dagger. Fishlegs, next to Hiccup, also had a sword, though opposite Hiccup, since Fishlegs was right handed. He looked uncharacteristically solemn compared to his usual enthusiastic self. Ruffnut and Tuffnut were on the other side of Astrid, each carrying lethal twin daggers (though Hiccup wasn't entirely sure they knew how to fight with both at once the effect was nevertheless impressive) and leering at those they passed. They too were much more serious than normal.

Villagers they passed stopped to stare at them, eyes following their path as they made their way to the great hall, but nobody interrupted them. Oh there were whispers and mutters behind them, Vikings silently tagging along, curious as to what they had planned, but nobody spoke to them. Perhaps it was their expressions and battle ready manner that keep the others away. Perhaps they looked more battle worn than battle ready. Perhaps it was the fact that Hiccup was clearly a part of the group â€“ and outcasts weren't allowed to return to the village. Perhaps it was Hiccup's presence itself that kept them from speaking, for they had seen him atop the legendary, and previously unseen, Night Fury, saving their chief's life during the last raid.

Or maybe it was simply because the last time the group had been seen they had flown away on dragons and were now returning alone and relatively unarmed.

Hiccup didn't know the reason, but he was grateful for the silence that allowed them to reach the center of the village unaccosted. His presence would likely bring the group the most trouble and he didn't want the plan to stop when it had barely just started.

Destination in mind, it wasn't long before they reached the great hall. The fire in the center was already ablaze, candles lighting the darkened corners of the massive room. Together the group pushed open the doors, calling even more attention to themselves as the massive wooden slabs burst open.

"We request an audience with the council!" Snotlout's voice rang loud and clear as he stepped forward, interrupting those finishing their evening meals. With an axe at his back, fellow warriors at his sides, and his voice echoing throughout the building, Hiccup would have considered Snotlout to be an impressive figure if it weren't for the nervousness in his voice. Luckily he didn't think anyone but his

fellow dragon riders would be able to hear the slight quiver in Snotlout's words.

Movement stopped, everyone turning to stare at the approaching teens. For a moment no one spoke. When it became clear that the teens had no intention of moving until their request was answered a Viking stood, slipping from the hall. Clearly he had gone to fetch Stoick.

The dragon riders were content to wait, moving forward so that others could enter the hall, but the Vikings around them didn't seem so patient to Hiccup. The silence remained only until the first of the villagers began to trickle in behind them and before long whispers filled the large room. Still, a large space remained around the group even as the Vikings poured in. Hiccup spotted some of his new friend's parents but although they looked apprehensive and worried, none approached.

That was probably his fault but Hiccup didn't let his determination waver. They had a good plan, and there was a chance that this would actually work. A chance to revoke his outcast status, to allow him to return to the village (whether or not he wanted to though, Hiccup wasn't sure). If this plan worked, he could speak to his father again as more than just the chief of Berk. And speaking of Stoickâ€¦

It was obvious the chief had finally arrived by the hush that moved through the crowd. Vikings instinctively moved out of the way as they allowed their chief to pass and Hiccup desperately hoped his fear wasn't evident to anyone else. He took a deep breath, trying to calm his beating heart, and watched as Stoick stopped opposite the riders, Spitelout and Gobber at his sides, members of the council surrounding him.

Stoick's eyes met Snotlout's first, confusion evident in his expression, before he glanced over the other teens. Upon spotting Hiccup (clearly no one had wanted to be the one to tell the chief that his son had returned, against all Viking rules) joy briefly filled his expression before quickly turning to apprehension. Hiccup knew it pained his father that he was continually breaking Viking law, but for a moment there he had almost thought that the man had been happy to see him.

His own heart had leapt at the eye contact and he wasn't sure who had looked away first, unable to meet the other's eye. He barely contained his surprise when the wooden doors slammed shut behind him and just managed not to jump. Finally, the council had gathered and tension filled the air as the dragon riders faced the Vikings, each group wondering who would speak first.

A voice from the back of the crowd interrupted the silence. "What's he doing here?" It was clear to all that he was talking about Hiccup.

"Quiet Mildew!" Someone else hissed quietly in the masses, but it was too late, the question had been asked. Luckily, Hiccup had revised that part of Snotlout's plan and the teens were prepared for interruptions.

"He's here to seek a retrial!" the Viking dragon rider declared, first besides Hiccup to sit upon the back of a Monstrous Nightmare, still commanding his voice to echo throughout the hall. "Due to the

fact that he had no representation at the first!"

The crowd shifting, frowning and muttering at themselves. It was a reasonable request â€“ the whole point of a trial was to speak the truth, hear both sides of an argument, before deciding punishment. But the council had been in a foul mood previously, with the loss of their arena dragons, and no one could disagree that they had acted hastily. Still, redoing a trial was rare and Hiccup couldn't remember one happening in his lifetime.

"And who will speak on his behalf, aside from Hiccup himself?" Spitelout, Snotlout's father, asked. His tone was curious rather than upset and Hiccup hoped that meant he would lean in their favor. "Who else knows the truth of what happened?"

It was a good question, as far as the Viking knew, Hiccup had acted alone. What they didn't know was that he had been in contact with the others since his exile and had told them everything.

"I will speak!" Fishlegs stepped forward, beating Snotlout to the punch. That wasn't part of the plan, but it didn't seem to matter.

"And I!" Snotlout spoke next, with only a side glance at Fishlegs.

"And I." Astrid added, also stepping forward.

The twins were next, adding their own sentiments to the others, and Hiccup felt warmth wash over him. He had known this would happen, they had planned for it (though Snotlout, as leader, had been supposed to speak first), but it was one this to discuss it and another for it to actually happen. To have friends, human friends who supported him in front of other Vikingsâ€œ! It was something wholly unfamiliar and incredibly welcoming. He made a mental note to fine tune each of their saddles, perhaps show them that hot spring that was just the right temperature in the cold winter months. They had no idea of how much their words meant to him.

"And you each have some truth to add to the tale?" Stoick spoke for the first time, looking over the teens with a severe gaze. Only those who had knowledge to add to the story were supposed to speak, to do so otherwise would be considered a waste of time and was not acceptable by Viking law. Hopefully Stoick wasn't upset with them, merely holding them to tradition.

Warmth washed away, Hiccup tried not to squirm in the face of his father's displeasure, something he had done all his life until he had finally stood up for himself â€“ and summarily been exiled.

"We do," Snotlout replied, meeting the chief's gaze and holding it. Hiccup supposed that after facing down a dragon the size of a small island from atop a Monstrous Nightmare, keeping eye contact with someone just wasn't that scary, even if it was the chief of your tribe.

Stoick nodded once, looking thoughtful, and his gaze wandered slightly toward Hiccup before snapping back to Snotlout. "You understand we'll need some time to discuss this," he said softly (for Stoick at least), compassion entering his voice.

As though his words had healed an unseen injury the tension in the room vanished with a snap. No longer were two opposing factions facing off, about to do battle with their words. Now it was just Berk's children, asking to be heard. They were friends and relatives, not strangers with a grudge match.

Snotlout gave his own nod in reply, also lowering his voice. "We do." Gone was the formal tone, the commanding voice. There would be no confrontation tonight. "We'll return in the morning for your decision."

Shoulders around the room relaxed, relief clear in many faces, and Hiccup saw most of his friend's parents shift forward slightly as though wanting to reach out to their children. It was clear they thought their children would be returning home once more. But the dragon riders had not yet relaxed. They wanted the adults to know that they were serious, that they meant every word that they were saying.

Having planned the moment, Hiccup and the others stepped aside slightly, turning as Snotlout moved to face them instead. Hiccup met his eyes briefly, a flash of panic running through Snotlout's gaze as if to say "what the heck are we doing?" He tried to convey that he thought that Snotlout was doing rather well, trying to give the teen confidence in his actions, but he didn't know if he was successful as the teen looked away once more, now facing the door with his previous solemn expression back in place.

Letting Snotlout lead the way again, the group moved to leave the hall, whispers starting up behind them again.

"Wait, what do you mean the morning? You're not staying?"

Hiccup thought it was Fishlegs' father who had spoken, but he couldn't spot the man in the crowd.

Snotlout paused just before the doors, glancing over his shoulder. "We'll return for the trial," he said, and then they were gone.

As the doors shut behind them, cutting off the noise from the Vikings who had gathered for them, Hiccup contemplated everything that had happened. Snotlout's words had made it clear that they expected the council to make a certain decision, but Hiccup didn't know how much weight a few teenagers' demands would carry. The fact that they wouldn't even stay in town until a retrial had been agreed upon certainly gave strength to their cause, and they hadn't even mentioned the dragons yet so surely the adults would let them speak if only to learn the truth about what had happened earlier that day, but Hiccup couldn't be sure.

No one spoke as they walked through the village together, perhaps all feeling as Hiccup did, that it wouldn't truly be safe to relax until they had left Berk. Night had fallen during the town meeting and Hiccup took the lead from Snotlout as they reached the dark woods, knowing he could find his way to the Cove blindfolded and walking backward. It was only after the last lights from Berk had disappeared behind them that someone finally spoke.

"Well I think that went well," Astrid said sincerely.

Beside Hiccup, Fishlegs stumbled slightly over a tree root. "Do you think they'll go for it?"

"Of course they will, I didn't give them much of a choice now did I?" Snotlout retailed, not quite as boastful as Hiccup had known him to be in the past. He was limping more heavily now, putting more weight onto the walking stick in his hand.

"Yeah, did you see their faces?" Tuffnut asked (and Hiccup could just hear the mischievous grin in the other rider's words).

Having been unusually silent until now, both the twins cackled at Tuffnut's words. "They didn't know what hit them!" Ruffnut added gleefully. For a brief moment Hiccup wondered whether or not he should take their daggers away.

In the silence that followed Ruffnut's words it took Hiccup a moment for him to realize that they were waiting for him to speak. Pushing aside his own doubts and fears he mustered up a smile, forgetting that they wouldn't be able to see it. "You did great Snotlout," he said. "They'll give us a trial for sure." Of that he was certain. Snotlout had done well, and the villagers of Berk would want their children back. What he wasn't certain of was the outcome of the trial.

Nobody had mentioned it, and he wasn't sure that the thought had even occurred to the others, but there was a slim possibility that they would all end up banished. With their actions earlier that day, and the fact that they were going to back Hiccup up in everything he said, each teenager there was technically consorting with dragons. They were working with beings that Berk considered to be the enemy. He had hope that the Vikings would not be so rash as to exile five of their young warriors without thought but after what had happened to him he couldn't make himself believe that they wouldn't.

Silence fell again, only the sounds of the wind through the trees and the distance cries of night animals to accompany them, but it was a companionable silence, rather than an awkward one. Hiccup could tell that the realization of what they had done that day, and not just in Berk, was finally sinking in.

"There won't be any more dragon raids," Astrid said out loud, half to herself.

Fishlegs stumbled again at the words and everyone paused momentarily, forcing Hiccup to stop as well. In the dim light from the stars he could just make out their astonished expressions, watching as they attempted to exchange glances.

"No," Hiccup agreed, calling them back to the present. "Vikings and dragons are done fighting. Berk won't have to worry about that anymore." He knew it was a startling thought to the others â€“ one's entire life in Berk was centered around fighting dragons: younger children did fire patrol during raids, teenagers joined dragon training â€“ everyone was a warrior when a raid happened. Hiccup could just about guess what they were thinking: What now?

"C'mon," he started moving again. "We should get some rest before tomorrow."

And the group followed him into the dark.

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><p>Once in the Cove the riders paired off with their dragons, pulling blankets out of saddlebags and settling down for the night, but Hiccup found himself unable to sleep. He leaned on Toothless, grateful for his friend's warmth, and tried to calm his nerves. Being back in Berk had beenâ€œ unsettling. He'd never really been a part of the village before he was exiled, never really relied on it for anything but food and shelter, but at one point in time it had been his home. And then it hadn't. He'd spent more and more days in the woods, more nights with Toothless, even whole days away from the island when he knew Stoick wasn't going to be looking for him.</p>

And now, a month after his exile, he was used to living alone with Toothless and other dragons. He knew he'd changed after leaving Berk. He'd decided he was done hiding, he'd revealed the truth (at least about the Red Death) to Fishlegs and Astrid, and then the others. He'd been free to make his own choices, regardless of what others thought.

Now, after not even an hour in Berk, surrounded by humans whispering about him, he was ready to run, desperately wishing he could hop on Toothless and leave. 'I can't do this,' he thought to himself.

Hiccup had made his peace, however hesitantly, with the thought that he wouldn't be returning to Berk. Their actions today had brought him so close to having his banishment revoked, but Hiccup didn't know how he would react if their plan didn't work. If he had to go through being banished again, being rejected by those he still cared about, it would take a lot longer to recover.

Behind him, Toothless shifted slightly. '\_Go to sleep,\_' the dragon grumbled without opening his eyes.

Despite his anxiety, Hiccup grinned, snuggling in closer to his friend. The dragon's words had strengthened his resolve â€œ he had survived without Berk for a long time now and he could continue to do so. No matter what happened tomorrow, Toothless would have his back, of that he was absolutely certain.

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><p><strong>AN: Sorry for the terribly wrong wait, but I'm sure you're used to that by now. Thank you so much to everyone reading, following, favoriting, and reviewing this story - it would never have gotten this far without you. The way it stands right now, we've got one more chapter then possibly an epilogue. Please, let me know what you think!</strong>

End  
file.